THE SHORT STORY MAGAZINE

argosy

APRIL

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A BLANDINGS CASTLE STORY BY P. G. WODEHOUSE

Australia 40c New Zealand 4s South Africa 40c Rhodesia 4s 6d East Africa 4.50c West Africa 4s Malta 4s 3d Malaysia $2.10

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Vol. XXVIII No. 4 Cover by Bryn Havord APRIL 1967

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Acknowledgments are due for permission to reprint copyright material: to the Daily Mirror for the poem by Joseph Chattin; to J. M. Dent for the Ogden Nash poem from his collection "Versus"; to Penguin for the lines by Barbara Euphan Todd from "The Puffin Book of Verse". "First Aid for Freddie" has recently been published in "Plum Pie", under the title "Sticky Wicket at Blandings", © P. G. Wodehouse 1966.

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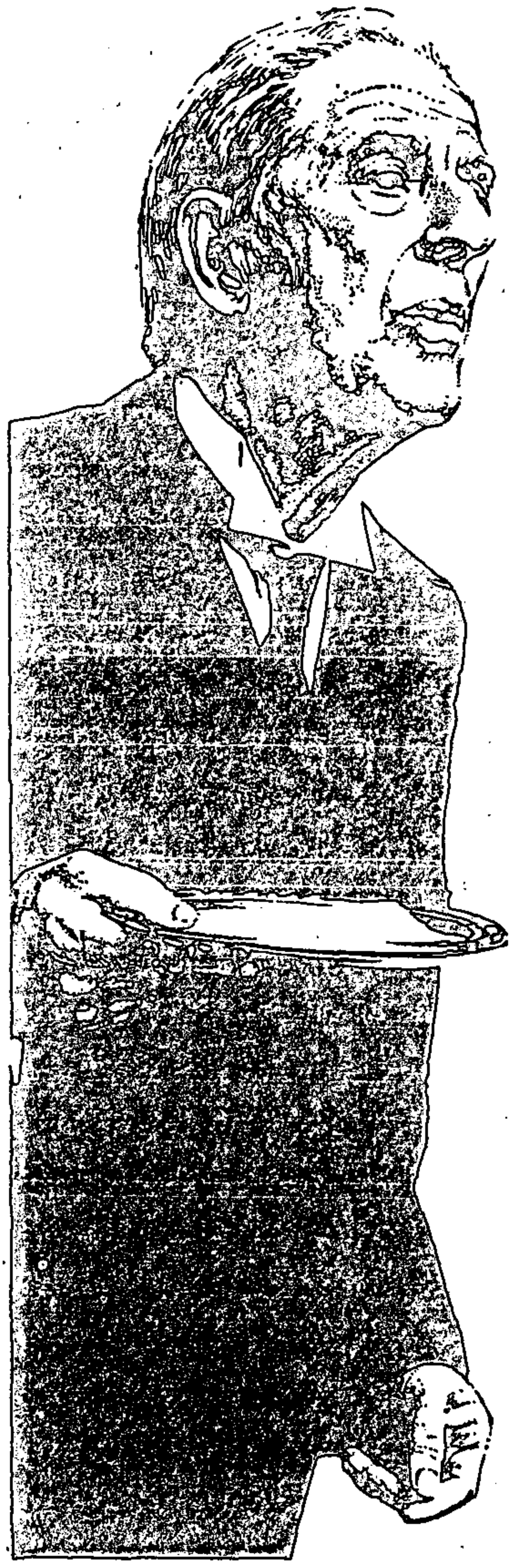
A Blandings Castle story . . . . .



First

IT was a beautiful afternoon. The sky was blue, the sun was yellow, butterflies flitted, birds tooted, bees buzzed and, to cut a long story short, all nature smiled.

But on Lord Emsworth's younger son Freddie Threepwood, as he sat in his sports car at the front door of Blandings Castle, a fine Alsatian dog at his side, these excellent weather conditions made little impression. He was thinking of dog biscuits.

Freddie was only an occasional visitor at the castle these days. Some years before, he had married the charming daughter of Mr. Donaldson of Donaldson's Dog Joy, the organisation whose aim it is to keep the American dog one hundred per cent red-blooded by supplying it with wholesome and nourishing biscuits, and had gone off to Long Island City, U.S.A., to work for the firm.

He was in England now because his father-in-law, anxious

. . . . by P. G. WODEHOUSE

aid for Freddie

to extend Dog Joy's sphere of influence, had sent him back there to see what he could do in the way of increasing sales in the island kingdom.

Aggie, his wife, had accompanied him, but after a week or so had found that life at Blandings was too quiet for her and had left for the French Riviera. The arrangement was that at the conclusion of his campaign in England Freddie should join her there.

He was drying his left ear, on which the Alsatian had just bestowed a moist caress, when there came down the front steps a small, dapper elderly gentleman with a black-rimmed monocle in his eye.

This was that notable figure of London's bohemia, his Uncle Galahad, at whom the world of the theatre, the race-course and the livelier type of restaurant had been pointing with pride for years. He greeted Gally cordially. To his sisters, Constance, Julia, Dora and Hermione, Gally might

be a blot on the escutcheon, but in Freddie he excited only admiration. He considered him a man of infinite resource and sagacity, as, indeed, he was.

"Well, young Freddie," said Gally. "Where are you off to with that dog?"

"I'm taking him to the Fanshawes'."

"At Marling Hall? That's where that pretty girl I met you with the other day lives, isn't it?"

"That's right. Valerie Fanshawe. Her father's the local master of hounds. And you know what that means."

"What does it mean?"

"That he's the managing director of more dogs than you could shake a stick at, each dog requiring the daily biscuit. And what could be better for them than Donaldson's Dog Joy, containing as it does all the essential vitamins?"

"You're going to sell him dog biscuits?"

"I don't see how I can miss. Valerie is the apple of his eye, to whom he can deny nothing. She covets this Alsatian and says if I'll give it to her, she'll see that the old man comes through with a substantial order. I'm about to deliver it F.O.B."

"But, my good Freddie, that dog is Aggie's dog. She'll go up in flames."

"Oh, that's all right. I've budgeted for that. I have my story all set and ready. I shall tell her it died and I'll get her another just as good. That'll fix Aggie. But I mustn't sit here chewing the fat with you, I must be up and about and off and away. See you later," said Freddie, and disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

He left Gally pursing his lips. A lifetime spent in the society of bookies, race-course touts and skittle sharps had made him singularly broad-minded, but he could not regard these tactics with approval. Shaking his head, he went back into the house and in the hall encountered Beach, the castle butler. Beach was wheezing a little, for he had been hurrying, and he was no longer the streamlined young butler he had been when he had first taken office.

"Have I missed Mr. Frederick, sir?"

"By a hair's breadth. Why?"

"This telegram has arrived for him, Mr. Galahad. I thought it might be important."

"Most unlikely. Probably somebody just wiring him the results of the four-o'clock race somewhere. Give it to me. I'll see that he gets it on his return."

He continued on his way, feeling now rather at a loose end. A sociable man, he wanted someone to talk to. He could, of course,

go and chat with his sister Lady Constance, who was reading a novel on the terrace, but something told him that there would be little profit and entertainment in this. Most of his conversation consisted of anecdotes of his murky past, and Connie was not a good audience for these. He decided on consideration to look up his brother Clarence, with whom it was always a pleasure to exchange ideas, and found that mild and dreamy peer in the library staring fixedly at nothing.

"Ah, there you are, Clarence," he said.

Lord Emsworth sat up with a startled "Eh, what?", his stringy body quivering.

"Oh, it's you, Galahad?"

"None other. What's the matter, Clarence?"

"Matter?"

"There's something on your mind. The symptoms are unmistakable. A man whose soul is at rest does not leap like a nymph surprised while bathing when somebody tells him he's there. Confide in me."

Lord Emsworth was only too glad to do so. A sympathetic listener was precisely what he wanted.

"It's Connie," he said.

"What's she been doing?"

"Did you hear what she was saying at breakfast?"

"I didn't come down to breakfast."

"Ah, then you probably missed it. Well, right in the middle of the meal—I was eating a kippered herring at the time—she told me she was going to get rid of Beach."

"*What! Get rid of Beach?*"

" 'He is so slow,' she said. 'He wheezes. We ought to have a younger, smarter butler.' I was appalled. I choked on my kippered herring."

"I don't blame you. Blandings without Beach is unthinkable. So is Blandings with what she calls a young, smart butler at the helm. Good God! I can picture the sort of fellow she would get, some acrobatic stripling who would turn somersaults and slide down the banisters. You must put your foot down, Clarence."

"Who, me?" said Lord Emsworth.

The idea seemed to him too bizarre for consideration. He was, as has been said, a mild, dreamy man; his sister Constance a forceful and imperious woman modelled on the lines of the late Cleopatra. Nominally he was the master of the house and, as such, entitled to exercise his veto, but in practice Connie's word was always law. Look at the way she made him wear a top hat at the annual village school treat. He had reasoned and

pleaded, pointing out in the clearest possible way that for a purely rural festivity of that sort à simple fishing hat would be far more suitable, but every year when August came around there he was, balancing the beastly thing on his head again and just asking the children in the tea tent to throw rock cakes at it.

"I can't put my foot down with Connie."

"Well, I can, and I'm going to. Fire Beach, indeed! After eighteen years' devoted service. The idea's monstrous."

"He would, of course, receive a pension."

"It's no good her thinking she can gloss it over with any talk about pensions. Wrap it up as she may, the stark fact remains that she's planning to give him the bum's rush. She must not be allowed to do this frightful thing. Good heavens, you might just as well fire the Archbishop of Canterbury."

He would have spoken further, but at this moment there came from the stairs outside the clumping of feet, announcing that Freddie was back from the Fanshawes and on his way to his room. Lord Emsworth winced. Like so many aristocratic fathers, he was allergic to younger sons; and since going to live in America, Freddie had acquired a brisk, go-getter jumpiness which jarred upon him.

"Frederick," he said with a shudder, and Gally started.

"I've got a telegram for Freddie," he said. "I'd better take it up to him."

"Do," said Lord Emsworth. "And I think I will go and have a look at my flowers."

He left the room and, making for the rose garden, pottered slowly to and fro, sniffing at its contents. It was a procedure that as a rule gave him great pleasure, but today his heavy heart found no solace in the scent of roses. Listlessly he returned to the library and took a favourite pig book from its shelf. But even pig books were no palliative.

The thought of Beach fading from the Blandings scene, if a man of his impressive bulk could be said to fade, prohibited concentration.

He had sunk into a sombre reverie, when it was interrupted by the entrance of the subject of his gloomy meditations.

"Pardon me, m'lord," said Beach. "Mr. Galahad desires me to ask if you would step down to the smoking room and speak to him."

"Why can't he come up here?"

"He has sprained his ankle, m'lord. He and Mr. Frederick fell downstairs."

"Oh?" said Lord Emsworth, not particularly interested. Freddie was always doing odd things. So was Galahad. "How did that happen?"

"Mr. Galahad informs me that he handed Mr. Frederick a telegram. Mr. Frederick, having opened and perused it, uttered a sharp exclamation, reeled, clutched at Mr. Galahad, and they both fell downstairs. Mr. Frederick, too, has sprained his ankle. He has retired."

"Bless my soul. Are they in pain?"

"I gather that the agony has to some extent abated. They have been receiving treatment from the kitchen maid. She is a brownie."

"She's a *what*?"

"A brownie, m'lord. It is a species of female boy scout. They are instructed in the fundamentals of first aid."

"Eh? First aid? Oh, you mean first aid," said Lord Emsworth, reading between the lines. "Bandages and all that, what?"

"Precisely, m'lord."

By the time Lord Emsworth reached the smoking room the brownie had completed her ministrations and gone back to her *Screen Gems*. Gally was lying on a sofa, looking not greatly disturbed by his accident. He was smoking a cigar.

"Beach tells me you had a fall?" said Lord Emsworth.

"A stinker," Gally assented. "As who wouldn't when an ass of a nephew grabs him at the top of two flights of stairs?"

"Beach seems to think Frederick's action was caused by some bad news in the telegram you gave to him."

"That's right. It was from Aggie."

"Aggie?"

"His wife."

"I thought her name was Frances."

"No, Niagara."

"What a peculiar name."

"A gush of sentiment on the part of her parents. They spent the honeymoon at Niagara Falls."

"Ah, yes, I have heard of Niagara Falls. People go over them in barrels, do they not? Now there is a thing I would not care to do myself. Most uncomfortable, I should imagine, though no doubt one would get used to it in time. Why was her telegram so disturbing?"

"Because she says she's coming here and will be with us the day after tomorrow."

"I see no objection to that."

"Freddie does, and I'll tell you why. He's gone and given her dog to Valerie Fanshawe."

"Who is Valerie Fanshawe?"

"The daughter of Colonel Fanshawe of Marling Hall, the tallyho and viewhalloo chap. Haven't you met him?"

"No," said Lord Emsworth, who never met anyone if he could help it. "But why should Frances object to Frederick giving this young woman a dog?"

"I didn't say *a* dog, I said *her* dog. Her personal Alsatian, whom she loves to distraction. However, that could be straightened out, I imagine, with a few kisses and a remorseful word or two if Valerie Fanshawe were a girl with a pasty face and spectacles, but unfortunately she isn't. Her hair is golden, her eyes blue, and years of huntin', shootin' and fishin', not to mention swimmin', tennis playin' and golfin', have rendered her figure lissome and slender. She looks like something out of a beauty chorus, and as you are probably aware, the little woman rarely approves of her mate being on chummy terms with someone of that description. Let Aggie get one glimpse of Valerie Fanshawe and learn that Freddie has been showering dogs on her, and she'll probably divorce him."

"Surely not?"

"It's in the cards. American wives get divorces at the drop of a hat."

"Bless my soul. What would Frederick do then?"

"Well, her father obviously wouldn't want him working at his dog-biscuit emporium. I suppose he would come and live here."

"What, at the castle?" cried Lord Emsworth, appalled. "Good God!"

"So you see how serious the situation is. However, I've been giving it intense thought, turning here a stone, exploring there an avenue, and I am glad to say I have found the solution. We must get that dog back before Aggie arrives."

"You will ask Valerie Fanshawe to return it?"

"Not quite that. She would never let it go. It will have to be pinched, and that's where you come in."

"I?"

"Who else is there? Freddie and I are both lying on beds of pain, unable to move, and we can hardly ask Connie to oblige. You are our only mobile force. Your quick intelligence has probably already told you what you have to do. What do people do when they've got a dog? They instruct the butler to let it out for a run last thing at night."

"Do they?"

"Invariably. Or bang go their carpets. Every dog has its last-thing-at-night outing, and I think we can safely assume that it will be via the back door."

"What the back door?"

"Via."

"Oh, via? Yes, yes, quite."

"So you must pop over to the Fanshawes'—say around ten o'clock—and lurk outside their back door till the animal appears, and bring it back here."

Lord Emsworth stared, aghast.

"But, Galahad!"

"It's no good saying 'But, Galahad!' It's got to be done. You don't want Freddie's whole future to turn blue at the edges and go down the drain, do you? Let alone having him at the castle for the rest of his life. Ah, I see you shudder. I thought you would. And, dash it, it's not much I'm asking of you. Merely to go and stand in a back garden and scoop in a dog. A child could do it. If it wasn't that we want to keep the thing a secret just between ourselves, I'd hand the job over to the brownie."

"But what if the dog refuses to accompany me? After all, we've scarcely met."

"I've thought of that. You must sprinkle your trouser legs with aniseed. Dogs follow aniseed to the ends of the earth."

"But I have no aniseed."

"Beach is bound to be able to lay his hands on some. And Beach never asks questions. Unlike Connie's young, smart butler, who would probably be full of them. Oh, Beach," said Gally, who had pressed the bell. "Do we have any aniseed in the house?"

"Yes, Mr. Galahad."

"Bring me a stoup of it, will you?"

"Very good, sir," said Beach.

If the request surprised him, he did not show it. Your experienced butler never allows himself to look surprised at anything. He brought the aniseed. At the appointed hour Lord Emsworth drove off in Freddie's sports car, smelling to heaven. And Gally, left alone, lit another cigar and turned his attention to *The Times* crossword puzzle.

He found it, however, difficult to concentrate. This was not merely because these crossword puzzles had become so abstruse nowadays and he was basically a Sun-god—Ra and Large-Australian-bird—emu man. Having seen Lord Emsworth off on his journey, doubts and fears were assailing him. He was wishing

he could feel more confident of his brother's chances of success in the mission that had been entrusted to him. A lifetime association with him had left him feeling that the head of the family was a frail reed on which to lean in an emergency. If there was any possible way of bungling the enterprise, he would, he knew, infallibly bungle it.

His genius for doing the wrong thing was a byword in his circle of acquaintance.

Which, he was asking himself, of the many ways open to him for messing everything up would Lord Emsworth select? Drive the car into a ditch? Go to the wrong house? Or would he forget all about his assignment and sit by the roadside musing on pigs? It was impossible to say, and Gally's emotions were similar to those of a general who, having planned a brilliant piece of strategy, finds himself dubious as to the ability of his troops to carry it out. Generals in such circumstances chew their moustaches in an overwrought sort of way, and Gally would have chewed his, if he had had one.

Heavy breathing sounded outside the door. Beach entered.

"Miss Fanshawe, sir," he announced.

Gally's acquaintance with Valerie Fanshawe was only a slight one, and in the interval since they had last met he had forgotten some of her finer points. Seeing her now, he realised how accurate had been his description of her to Lord Emsworth. In the best and deepest sense of the words, she was a dish and a pippin —in short, the very last type of girl to whom a young husband should have given his wife's Alsatian.

"Good evening," he said. "You must forgive me for not rising as directed in the books of etiquette. Unfortunately I've sprained my ankle."

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Valerie. "I hope I'm not disturbing you."

"Not at all."

"I asked for Mr. Threepwood, forgetting there were two of you. I came to see Freddie."

"He's gone to bed. He has sprained his ankle."

The girl seemed puzzled.

"Aren't you getting mixed up?" she said. "It was you who sprained the ankle."

"Freddie also."

"What, both of you? What happened?"

"We fell downstairs together."

"What made you do that?"

"Oh, we thought we would. Can I give Freddie a message for you?"

"If you wouldn't mind. Tell him that all is well. Did he mention to you that he was trying to sell Father those dog biscuits of his?"

"He did."

"Well, I approached Father on the subject and he said, Oh, all right, he would give them a try. He said he didn't suppose they would actually poison the dumb chums, and as I was making such a point of it he'd take a chance."

"Splendid."

"And I've brought back the dog."

It was only the most sensational piece of news that could make Gally's monocle drop from his eye. At these words it fell like a shooting star.

"You've done *what*?" he exclaimed, retrieving the monocle and replacing it in order the better to goggle at her.

"He gave me an Alsatian dog this afternoon, and I've brought it back."

"You mean you don't want it?"

"I want it all right, but I can't have it. The fathead's first act on clocking in was to make a beeline for Father's spaniel and try to assassinate it, the one thing calculated to get himself socially ostracised. Father thinks the world of that spaniel. 'Who let this canine paranoiac into the house?' he thundered, foaming at the mouth. I said I had. 'Where did you get the foul creature?' he demanded. 'Freddie gave him to me,' I said. 'Then you can damn well take him back to this Freddie, whoever he is,' he—"

"Vociferated?"

"Yes, vociferated. 'And let me add,' he said, 'that I am about to get my gun and count ten, and if the animal's still around when I reach that figure, I shall blow his head off at the roots, and the Lord have mercy on his soul, if any.' Well, I'm pretty quick and I saw right away that what he was hinting at was that he preferred not to associate with the dog, so I've brought him back. I think he went off to the servants' hall to have a bite of supper. I shall miss him, of course. Still, easy come, easy go."

And so saying, Valerie Fanshawe, reverting to the subject of Gally's ankle, expressed a hope that he would not have to have it amputated, and withdrew.

If at this moment somebody had started to amputate Gally's ankle, it is hardly probable that he would have noticed it, so centred were his thoughts on this astounding piece of good luck that had befallen a nephew of whom he had always been fond. If, as he supposed, it was the latter's guardian angel who had engineered the happy ending like a conjurer pulling a rabbit out

of a hat, he would have liked to slap him on the back and tell him how greatly his efforts were appreciated. Joy cometh in the morning, he told himself, putting the clock forward a little, and by way of celebrating the occasion he rang for Beach and asked for a whisky and soda.

It was some considerable time before the order was filled, and Beach was full of apologies for his tardiness.

"I must express my regret for being so long, Mr. Galahad. I was detained on the telephone by Colonel Fanshawe."

"The Fanshawe family seems very much with us tonight. Is there a Mrs. Fanshawe?"

"I understand so, Mr. Galahad."

"No doubt she will be dropping in shortly. What did the colonel want?"

"He was asking for his lordship, but I have been unable to locate him."

"He's gone for a stroll."

"Indeed? I was not aware. Colonel Fanshawe wished him to come to Marling Hall tomorrow morning in his capacity of justice of the peace. It appears that the butler at Marling Hall apprehended a prowler who was lurking in the vicinity of the back door and has locked him in the cellar. Colonel Fanshawe is hoping that his lordship will give him a sharp sentence."

For the second time that night Gally's monocle had fallen from the parent eye socket. He had not, as we have seen, been sanguine with regard to the possibility of his brother's getting through the evening without mishap, but he had not foreseen anything like this. This was outstanding, even for Clarence.

"Beach," he said, "this opens up a new line of thought. You speak of a prowler."

"Yes, sir."

"Who was lurking at the Fanshawe back door and is now in the Fanshawe cellar."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, here's something for your files. The prowler you have in mind was none other than Clarence, ninth Earl of Emsworth."

"Sir!"

"I asure you, I sent him to Marling Hall on a secret mission, the nature of which I am not empowered to disclose, and how he managed to get copped we shall never know. Suffice it that he did and is now in the cellar. Wine cellar or coal?"

"Coal, I was given to understand, sir."

"Our task, then, is to get him out of it. Don't speak. I must think."

When an ordinary man is trying to formulate a scheme for extricating his brother from a coal cellar, the procedure is apt to be a lengthy one involving the furrowed brow, the scratched head and the snapped finger; but in the case of a man like Gally, this is not so. Only a minimum of time had elapsed before he was able to announce that he had got it.

"Beach!"

"Sir?"

"Go to my bedroom, look in the drawer where the handkerchiefs are, and you will find a small bottle containing white tablets. Bring it to me."

"Would this be the bottle to which you refer, sir?" asked Beach, returning a few minutes later.

"That's the one. Now a few necessary facts. Is the butler at the Fanshawes' a pal of yours?"

"We are acquainted, sir."

"Then he won't be surprised if you suddenly pay him a call?"

"I imagine not, Mr. Galahad. I sometimes do when I find myself in the neighbourhood of Marling Hall."

"And on these occasions he sets them up?"

"Sir?"

"You drain a cup or two?"

"Oh yes, sir. I am always offered refreshment."

"Then the thing's in the bag. You see this bottle, Beach? It contains what are known as mickey finns. The name is familiar to you?"

"No, sir."

"They are a recognised sedative in the United States. When I last went to New York, a great friend of mine, a bartender on Eighth Avenue, happened to speak of them and was shocked to learn that I had none in my possession. They were things, he said, that nobody should be without. He gave me a few, assuring me that sooner or later they were bound to come in useful. Hitherto I have had no occasion to make use of them, but I think you will agree that now is the time for them to come to the aid of the party. You follow me, Beach?"

"No, sir."

"Come, come. You know my methods, apply them. Slip one of these into this butler's drink, and almost immediately you will see him fold up like a tired lily. Your path thus made straight, proceed to the cellar, unleash his lordship and bring him home."

"But, Mr. Galahad!"

"Now, what?"

"I hardly like—"

"Don't stand there making frivolous objections. If Clarence is not extracted from that cellar before tomorrow morning, his name will be mud. He will become a hissing and a byword."

"Yes, sir, but—"

"And don't overlook another aspect of the matter. Perform this simple task, and there will be no limit to his gratitude. Purses of gold will change hands. Camels bearing apes, ivory and peacocks, all addressed to you, will shortly be calling at the back door of Blandings Castle. You will clean up to an unimaginable extent."

It was a powerful plea. Beach's two chins, which had been waggling unhappily, ceased to waggle. A light of resolution came into his eyes. He looked like a butler who has stiffened the sinews and summoned up the blood, as recommended by Henry the Fifth.

"Very good, Mr. Galahad," he said.

Gally resumed his crossword puzzle. He was more than ever convinced that the compiler of the clues was suffering from softening of the brain, and in due course heavy breathing woke him from the light doze into which he had fallen while endeavouring to read sense into "7 across", and he found that Beach was back from the front. He had the air of one who has recently passed through some great spiritual experience.

"Well?" said Gally. "All washed up? Everything nice and smooth?"

"Yes, Mr. Galahad."

"You administered the medium dose for an adult?"

"Yes, Mr. Galahad."

"And released his lordship?"

"Yes, Mr. Galahad."

"That's my boy. Where is he?"

"Taking a bath, Mr. Galahad. He was somewhat begrimed. Would there be anything further, sir?"

"Not a thing. You can go to bed and sleep peacefully. Good night."

"Good night, sir."

It was some minutes later while Gally was wrestling with "12 down", that he found his privacy invaded by another caller with whom he had not expected to hobnob. It was seldom that his sister Constance sought his society. Except for shivering austerely whenever she saw him, she rarely had much to do with him.

"Oh, hello, Connie," he said. "Are you any good at crossword puzzles?"

Lady Constance did not say, "To hell with crossword puzzles," but it was plain that only her breeding restrained her from doing so.

She was in one of those moods of imperious wrath that so often had reduced Lord Emsworth to an apologetic jelly.

"Galahad," she said, "have you see Beach?"

"Just been chatting with him. Why?"

"I have been ringing for him for half an hour. He really is quite past his duties."

"Clarence was telling me that that was how you felt about him. He said you were thinking of firing him."

"I am."

"I shouldn't."

"What do you mean?"

"You'll rue the day."

"I don't understand you."

"Then let me tell you a little bedtime story."

"Please do not drivel, Galahad. Really, I sometimes think that you have less sense than Clarence."

"It is a story," Gally proceeded, ignoring the slur, "of a feudal devotion to the family interests that would be hard to overpraise. It shows Beach in so favourable a light that I think you will agree that when you speak of giving him the heave ho you are talking, if you will forgive me saying so, through the back of your neck."

"Have you been drinking, Galahad?"

"Only a series of toasts to a butler who will go down in legend and song. Here comes the story."

He told it well, omitting no detail however slight, and as his narrative unfolded, an ashen pallor spread over Lady Constance's face and she began to gulp in a manner that would have interested any doctor specialising in ailments of the thoracic cavity.

"So there you are," said Gally, concluding. "Even if you are not touched by his selfless service and lost in admiration of his skill in slipping mickey finns into people's drinks, you must realise that it would be madness to hand him the pink slip. You can't afford to have him spreading the tale of Clarence's activities all over the county, and you know as well as I do that, if sacked, he will dine out on the thing for months. If I were you, Connie, I would reconsider."

He eyed with satisfaction the wreck of what had once been a fine upstanding sister. He could read the message of those gulps. He could see that she was reconsidering.

SPRING SONG

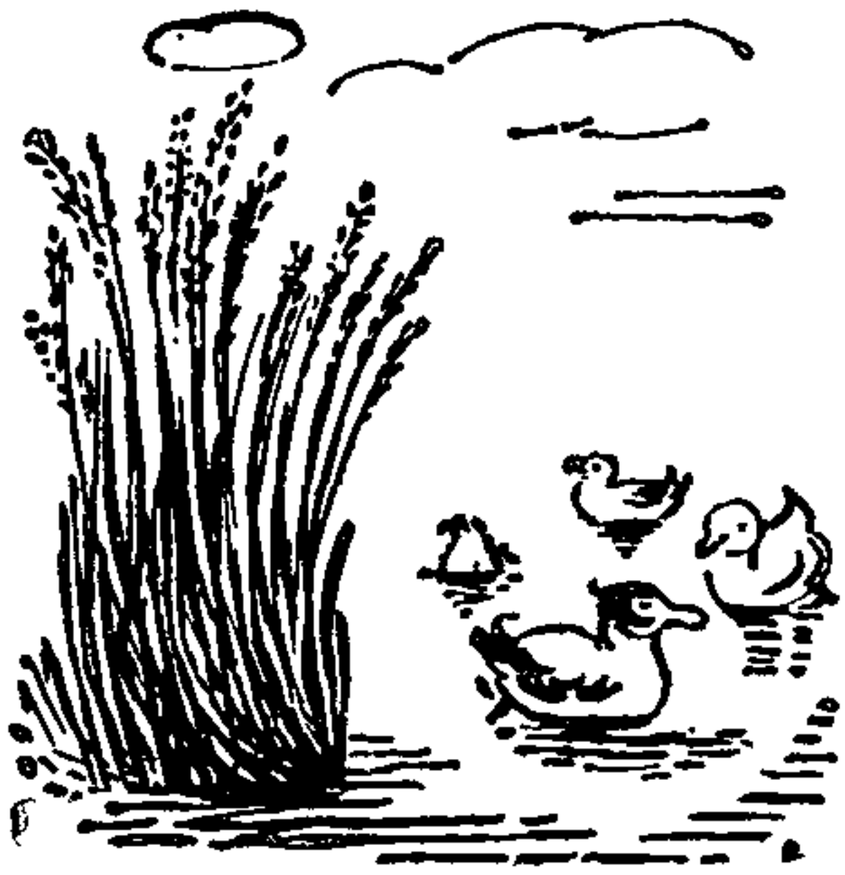
Sweet spring, full of sweet days and roses,
A box where sweets compacted lie.

GEORGE HERBERT, *Virtue*

ALWAYS MARRY AN APRIL GIRL

Praise the spells and bless the charms,
I found April in my arms.
April golden, April cloudy,
Gracious, cruel, tender, rowdy;
April soft in flowered languor,
April cold with sudden anger,
Ever changing, ever true—
I love April, I love you.

OGDEN NASH, *Versus*



Four ducks on a pond,
A grass bank beyond,
A blue sky of spring,
White clouds on the wing:
What a little thing
To remember for years—
To remember with tears!

WILLIAM ALLINGHAM, *A Memory*

The flowers that bloom in the spring
Tra la,
Have nothing to do with the case.

W. S. GILBERT, *The Mikado*

Oh, that we were at Laracor this fine day! The willows begin to peep, and the quicks to bud. My dream's out: I was a-dreamed last night that I eat ripe cherries. And now they begin to catch the pikes, and will shortly the trouts . . .

JONATHAN SWIFT, *Journal to Stella*

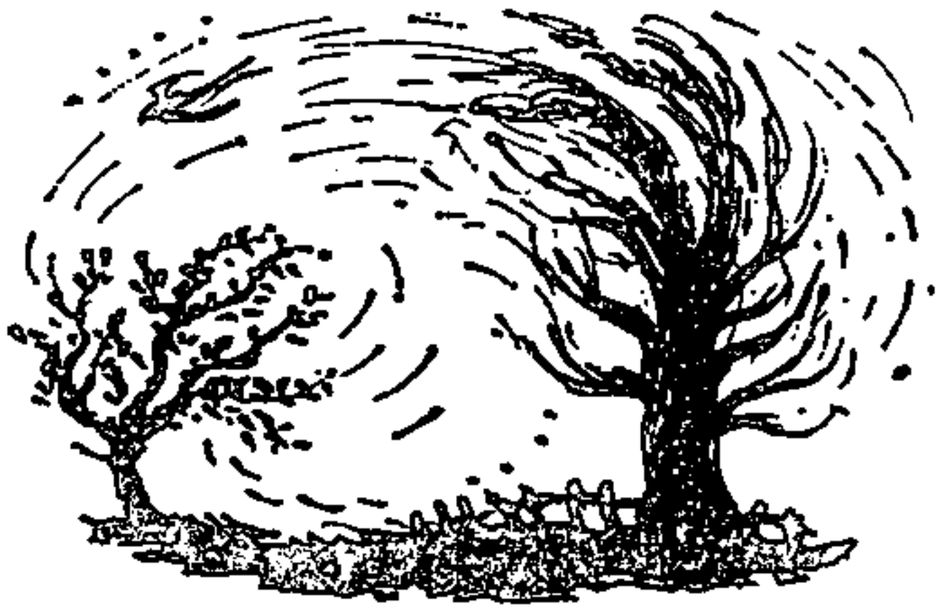
LIKE A LION

Up from the sea the wild north wind is blowing
Under the sky's grey arch;
Smiling, I watch the shaking elm boughs, knowing
It is the wind of March.

J. G. WHITTIER, *March*

Blossom on the plum,
Wild wind and merry;
Leaves upon the cherry,
And one swallow come.

NORA HOPPER, *March*

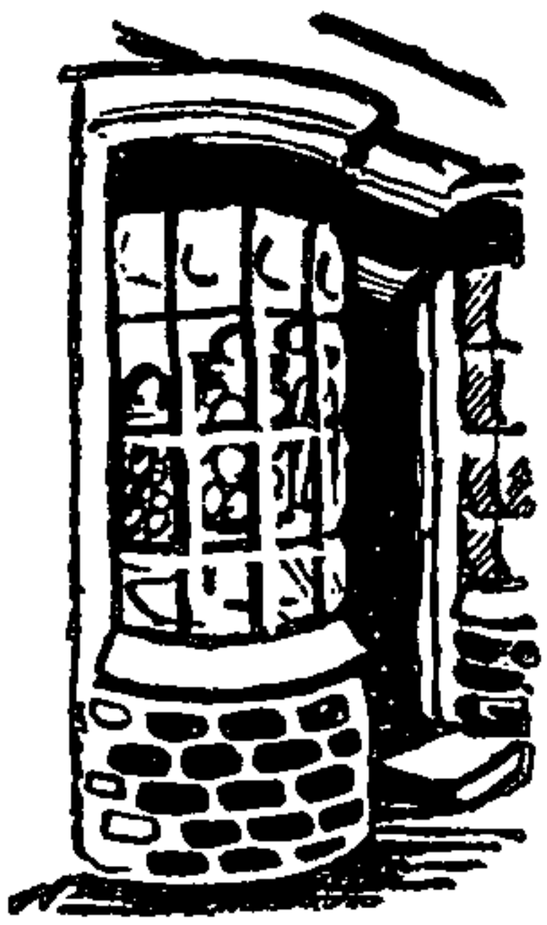


When the trellised grapes their flowers unmask,
And the new-born tendrils twine,
The old wine darkling in the cask
Feels the bloom on the living vine,
And bursts the hoops at hint of spring.

EMERSON, *May-Day*

Swallow, my sister, O sister swallow,
How can thy heart be full of the spring?
A thousand summers are over and dead.
What hast thou found in the spring to follow?
What hast thou found in thine heart to sing?
What wilt thou do when the summer is shed?

SWINBURNE, *Itylus*



I knew when Spring was come—
Not by the murmurous hum
Of bees in the willow-trees,
Or frills
Of daffodils,
Or the scent of the breeze;
But because there were whips and tops
By the jars of lollipops
In the two little village shops.

BARBARA EUPHAN TODD, *The Calendar*

BUNS AND BONNETS

Good Friday is ushered in with a universal cry of "Hot Cross Buns!" A parcel of them appears on every breakfast table. It is a rather small bun, more than usually spiced, and having its brown sugary surface marked with a cròss . . . If the eagerness with which young and old eat them could be held as expressive of an appropriate sentiment in their hearts, the English might be deemed a pious people.

Chambers' Book of Days

God expects from men . . . for the credit of their religion as well as the satisfaction of their conscience that their Easter devotions should in some measure come up to their Easter dress.

ROBERT SOUTH, *Sermons*

"I could have brought you some primroses, but I do not like to mix violets with anything."

"They say primroses make a capital salad," said Lord St. Jerome.

BENJAMIN DISRAELI, *Lothair*

But now she has gone, and left me behind,
What a marvellous change on a sudden I find!
When things were as fine as could possibly be,
I thought 'twas the spring; but alas! it was she!

JOHN BYROM, *Pastoral*

Traitors deserve what they get:
but can the avenger ever be free?

at the CHALET LARTREC

by WINSTON GRAHAM

I WAS looking out for a village. Almost any sort of a village would have done, because things had been difficult for the last hour.

The snow had started just as I reached the top of the pass. They'd told me in Pontresina that the road was still clear, and I'd found it so: a few piled heaps of white here and there like dirty linen waiting to be collected, but nothing new at all. Right at the summit by the now-empty hospice I stopped the car to let the engine cool in the icy wind and strolled about to ease my stiff leg; but I didn't stay long. The clouds were lowering all around like elephants' bellies, and it was lonely up there, more than a mile high, with nothing human or alive anywhere, the great peaks half hidden and the first fall of winter long overdue.

So I climbed in and the engine fired at the fourth push, and as I turned the car round the first corner the flakes of snow began to drift absent-mindedly about in the wind.

It's a nasty road at the best of times. You go down and down but never seem to get any lower, round dozens of acute hair-pin bends and through echoing tunnels with faint relics of daylight at the far end; and every time your tyres slither on the loose surface you look down thousands of feet into the dark pine-wooded valleys wreathed in cloud. It's like some mediaeval artist's vision of judgment; and of course if you slither too far the vision becomes an immediate fact.

In a mile or two it was snowing hard, and the car had no chains. It was nearly five o'clock—the climb having taken so

much longer because of that plug—and very soon it would be quite dark. The snow was fine and soft, and for a bit the strong wind blew it off the centre of the road piling it in drifts in the unexpected corners.

I'd hoped to make Tirano and find a hotel there—it looked no distance on the map—but today it just wasn't going to work out. I couldn't remember whether there was anything at all before Tirano except the frontier post. It might be better to try to spend the night in the car than to skid to the edge of a precipice and *then . . . whoo!*

The screenwipers were making heavy going of it, and I had to stop and get out to clear them. The snow was soft in my face, like walking into a flight of cold wet moths, and the wind was howling away in the distance across the valley. Somewhere nearer at hand just for a moment I caught the musical note of a cow-bell, but there was no other traveller, no other human being anywhere.

They might all have gone long ago to some more civilised land.

With the dark I had to stop again and again because the screen was freezing over and it was easy to miss the turns of the road. I could see the paragraphs in the papers: "The victim of a sudden storm in the Bernina Alps was Major Frederick Vane, aged 33, a British officer attached to UNESCO, who unwisely attempted to cross from Switzerland into Italy by the Bernina Pass, which is normally closed to vehicular traffic in October. His car . . ."

And then I turned one more contorted bend and the headlights showed up a few farm huts and the narrow cobbled street of a village.

It was a welcome sight. There was no-one about, and the wind whistled through the slit between the houses like an errand boy with bad teeth.

Almost at the end of the street I braked in time to avoid a man with a handcart. After the lonely drive, I felt warmed towards him as towards an old friend. But the feeling wasn't returned because he didn't like standing in the draught and didn't feel warmed at all. However, after a minute or two our conversation attracted attention even on that bleak night. Two other figures appeared, anxious to help. Yes, they said, it was as Angelo Luciano stated: nothing here, and doubts about Bagnolo, the next village, fifteen kilometres on. Beyond that was the frontier and then Tirano, but . . .

Then quite suddenly, as an afterthought, someone mentioned

the Chalet Lartrec, and at once they were all agreed it might be worth trying at the Chalet Lartrec, which was off this road and only about a kilometre distant. The season being over, they said, Monsieur Lartrec would have closed down his house, but it was just possible he would be willing to make an exception in a case like this.

By now my screen had frozen over completely, so I scraped it into a state of semi-transparency and thanked them and drove on, reflecting how often people forget the important thing until nearly too late.

At the stone marked 10, I turned as directed down a narrow track barely wide enough for a car. I knew that somewhere not far away the valley fell into further cloudy depths. Two gate-posts showed up and beyond that a light. I left the car in the slight shelter of three waving pines and picked a way across snow-filled frozen ruts towards the light, carrying my smallest suitcase.

The chalet was a three-storied place, painted in green, and all the shutters were up except those at the window that showed the light.

I knocked on the door and waited.

There was no reply. I knocked again, picturing the unknown Lartrec crouching ill-temperedly over his log fire. Just then there was the screech of bolts and I stood back a step.

Light came out and I saw a woman.

"Er—Monsieur Lartrec?" I said.

She was staring at me. Perhaps she was surprised at seeing a stranger.

"You wish to see my husband?" she said in French.

I explained. While I was speaking, the wind was shaking the door in her hand, and it blew little infiltrations of snow into the hall. She was quite young, with a lot of dark hair and deep-set black eyes.

When I had finished she said, "I regret, monsieur. We cannot put you up. We have no bed, no food. We are closed for the winter."

I pointed to the snow. "It is five or six inches already. All I need is shelter until daybreak."

"We are closed, monsieur. It is not possible."

"But I have no chains! I don't think I could even get my car up to the main road again."

She hesitated. "I will see my husband."

She shut the door tight, leaving me on the step, stamping my feet and thinking bitter thoughts. I reflected that French was not

her first language any more than it was mine. She was probably Swiss-Italian, or her mother tongue was that odd Romance dialect that a few Swiss still speak. Then the door came open and this time a tall man stood there. He peered out at me as if I were a typhoid carrier.

Wearily I explained it all again, and again came the same refusal. But by now I was getting bloody-minded and was not to be moved from his doorstep. Did he, I asked him, expect me to freeze to death in the car?

Suddenly he gave way. "Oh, very well. I see that it is bad for you. We must do what we can."

I followed him in, just holding my tongue; and it was fortunate that I did because, once they'd capitulated, they seemed willing to put a good face on it. I felt stiff and uncomfortable, willing to lie on a board somewhere and no thanks to them; but M. Lartrec showed me into a pleasant enough bedroom in which the central heating pipes were going full blast, and I gratefully thawed out and presently was called down to a meal of pasta, stewed steak, cheese and grapes, with a half litre of new and raw Chianti.

So I began to feel a whole lot better towards them and to life in general.

Lartrec was not above thirty-five, distinguished-looking in an angular way, brutally thin with great bony shoulders that he would shrug nervously as if his shirt were chafing him. Mme. Lartrec was probably a bit younger, good-looking in her way, with finely shaped hands that had been roughened and reddened with work. She might, I thought, have been ill, for the fine olive skin that usually goes with such looks as hers was oversallow.

Their only servant was a slow-witted boy with hair of a length that he did not know was fashionable, who followed his mistress —in person or with his gaze—wherever she went. Of Lartrec he seemed afraid.

For a few minutes after supper I sat in the large bare hall with my feet on the only square of carpet and tried to read last week's *Die Weltwoche*. But German has never been my strong point, and for the most part I listened to the lament of the wind and wondered if the roads would be quite blocked in the morning. To spend a night here was one thing, but I was due back in Rome on Monday.

The fingers of the thatched-barn cuckoo clock in the corner climbed up to nine, and when it had hiccupped I rose to go to

bed. I wandered round the room staring at the pictures: an impressionistic view of Lake Maggiore, three impossible snow scenes, a photograph of a fat young man with beady eyes; then I went through the dining room to the kitchen door and tapped on it.

The door was flung open and Lartrec looked at me.

"Yes?"

Behind him were shining pans, my unwashed dishes, skis in a corner, a big stove, the tear-stained face of his wife.

"I thought I'd just tell you I'm going to bed."

"Certainly, monsieur. Everything is to your liking?"

"Indeed, yes. I'm most grateful for the food and the shelter."

"You can find your way to your room? No, no, I'll show you."

I insisted this wasn't necessary, but he took absolutely no notice and I followed him upstairs. In the bedroom he seemed reluctant to go, and we made a few forced remarks. There was no ease between us, but he still stood by the door, tall and gaunt, like an unfrocked priest.

"You are Swiss?" I said, feeling sure he was not. His blue eyes flickered as he shook his head.

After a pause I said, "If I could have my breakfast at eight . . . ?"

"But of course."

"Anything will do. Anything you have: honey or an egg or even just a pot of coffee."

"Of course."

"I hope the roads won't be completely blocked."

"It seldom happens with the first fall. You must think it strange, monsieur, that my wife—that you should see my wife in tears."

"I'm married myself."

He stiffened. "It is not at all what you think. It is not domestic."

I said I was pleased to know it, and waited for him to go.

"You are in part responsible for this tonight."

I stared at him. "Sorry. I assure you I'll not stay here a minute longer than I can help."

"No, no. It is not just your coming, it is your coming tonight of all nights that gave her a shock. It is exactly the anniversary of something which happened twelve months ago. The anniversary to the day and to the hour." He weighed me up. "You are from England?"

"Yes."

"I thought so from your accent. I have never been to England but I have often wished to go."

There was a pause. We didn't seem to be getting very far. "Cigarette?" I said.

"In England you suffered from two wars, but not in the same ways. In Hungary . . ." He stopped.

Light dawned. The high cheek-bones, the blue eyes, the rather metallic voice. "You are Hungarian?"

"Yes," he said half reluctantly.

"I spent a few days in Budapest once. A beautiful city."

He gave that nervous twitch to his shoulders. "My native town is Szeged . . . that conveys nothing to you?"

"I'm afraid not. Where is it?"

"A hundred and ninety kilometres south of Budapest. The second city of the republic. It is where the revolution of 1956 began."

"The rev . . ." I stopped. "Oh . . . that one. Were you there?"

"I was one of the leaders of the student movement."

Neither of us spoke for a bit. "Cigarette?" I said again, interested now.

He came back into the room and took one. I lit it for him, and his face, nodding his thanks, came out of the smoke, rapt and painful.

"Did you get away?" I asked sympathetically.

"No . . ."

"What happened?"

"I was transported to Russia. I was there—in Siberia—eight years."

I studied his face. I have seen these men before. They are of all nationalities, but once you have seen the signs in one man you recognise them in others.

"You revolted against the Communists?"

He drew on his cigarette with hollowed cheeks. "I think you have to clear your mind, monsieur, of some misconceptions, like most Westerners. When the war ended in Europe I was eleven. After that *everyone* in Hungary was Communist. There was no alternative. What we were revolting against in 1956 was not just Communism as we understood it, but the iron hand of *Soviet* Communism as exercised through Rakosi, the Secretary of the Party. We did not want everything at once, but just the beginnings of freedom, such as Yugo-slavia enjoyed; and Mr. Nagy, our prime minister, had undertaken to set on foot some of those liberal reforms, including free elections.

"All this was set at nought by the arrival of Russian forces in

Budapest and the deposing of Nagy. It was against this, and against the presence of a foreign power occupying our territory, that we organised the first demonstrations."

He stopped and frowned at his cigarette, moved to tap the ash into the plastic ashtray on the dressing-table.

"Is your wife Hungarian?" I asked.

"My wife? Yes. Why?"

"It was a natural inference. Did she escape, then?"

"In 1956 Maria was not my wife. In 1956 I was twenty-two. In our childhood she and I had been sweethearts; but while I was at the university we drifted apart and she had just at this time married Julius Zigani. She was nineteen then and he was twenty-five, the oldest of our group. He came of an old Magyar family and had a little money of his own. She was not happy with him."

The room was warm and I loosened my tie. Outside the wind howled like a bereaved dog.

"She was not happy with him, monsieur. I knew later that all the time she had loved me."

"The demonstrations?" I prompted after a minute.

"We students were an idealistic lot, dreaming of new freedoms; but also we were practical. Each week secret pamphlets were written and distributed. Much preparatory work was done. Of course our group was only one of many. In our group there was Maurus Kozma, who was our leader, and Emeric Erdy—and Julius Zigani. Those first demonstrations—I cannot tell you how full they were of high spirits and of hope. After the first day in Szeged we drove in trucks to Budapest to join with students and with factory workers there. But this led to clashes with the AVH, our own abominable secret police, whom we hated even more than the Russians.

"Next morning Russian tanks moved in and opened fire on us. But by now we had ample small weapons, for much of our own army had joined us. Half Budapest was laid waste and at last the revolt died down. But Mr. Nagy was brought back, and it seemed that our efforts and sacrifices were not to be in vain, after all.

"Of course you know the rest. Three days later many armoured divisions of Soviet troops moved into the city, thousands were bloodily murdered and the legal government was overthrown and a puppet government set up in its place. Mr. Nagy took refuge in a foreign embassy, from which later he was to be decoyed by a lying promise of safe conduct, and sent to imprisonment and execution. Mass executions and deportations

of the leaders of the revolt then took place. I went into hiding with Kozma and Erdy. Julius Zigani and Maria were somewhere in the city but we lost touch with them. Many tried to leave the country, some with success, but at that time we had not given up. To leave one's country is to leave one's hope . . ."

He stopped then and moved slowly to the window to peer out. There was something furtive in his movements, as if years of exile had left their mark.

"But in the end?" I said.

"In the end we were caught. Someone had informed on us. Kozma was shot. Erdy and I were deported. Erdy died in exile. I lived to come back."

"To Hungary?"

"Not to Hungary. But to look for Julius Zigani."

"Why?"

"It was he who betrayed us. The Russians told us. They told us he had bought his freedom by selling his friends. Not only did he betray us but six others also. Maria did not know, though she tells me now she once suspected and then dismissed the suspicion as too evil to be true. They left Hungary and settled in Switzerland. Zigani had been able to bring out a little money and he bought this chalet and opened it to summer guests."

"You—found them?"

His shadow gave a jerk on the wall as he twitched his shoulders. "It was twelve months ago. You understand. How I traced them does not matter. He had changed his name, but that does not matter either. In the afternoon I came to this chalet just as it was getting dark. I was not sure even then, not at all sure. I came up to it but I did not knock on the door as you knocked on the door. Instead I crept round to the kitchen and looked in at the window.

"They were there, in the light of the newly lit lamp, Maria putting food on his plate, and Zigani bending greedily to eat it. She seemed scarcely changed, but he had put on some more weight. He was always as fat as a pig, with small eyes, old eyes, and short lashless lids."

I was suddenly reminded of the photograph of the fat man in the hall. Lartrec had paused. Up till now I had been too interested to care, but at this moment it occurred to me that I did not want to hear any more.

"Don't you think you've told me enough?"

He said, "I went round to the front then and knocked. The boy came, the rather simple boy. I pushed past him and went into the kitchen, shutting the boy out. They looked at me as if

frozen where they sat. Something had been spilled on the stove and was hissing. I said to Zigani, 'There are nine of us here, Julius, not just one. Nine of us, all of that one group. Maurus and Stephen, who were shot, and Erdy, and Victor who died in captivity, and Leo who was killed by the hounds . . .'

"I went on to the end, and all the time he sat there with a stain of egg on the corner of his mouth. When I'd finished I looked at Maria and said, 'Did you know this man—' And then I heard him move. He'd jumped—so quick for a fat man—to a drawer and I went after him to the oven. As he turned with a revolver I hit him across the head with the iron poker."

Lartrec dropped his smouldering cigarette in the ashtray. Whatever I felt now, he was going on to the end.

"He was dead within five minutes. I felt no sorrow and no sense of guilt. It was what I had come for, what I had intended to do for so long. But we had to face the outcome. We were no longer in a country at war where such things pass unheeded. It seemed that the only possible way would be to flee while there was still time. Italy, or more probably France, might give us asylum. France has accepted and absorbed so many refugees in trouble, and Maria and I could begin a new life there.

"But it was Maria who suggested another way. No-one knew of my presence in the neighbourhood. If I were to carry the body to the bottom of the cellar steps and leave it in the appropriate position it might well appear that he had fallen and caught his head on the iron stairs. The boy was devoted to Maria and would say anything she told him. Suppose I went away again as I had come, there was no-one in the house strong enough to inflict such a blow. And he was a heavy man and the fall down the steps would be great.

"There was danger, of course, but the other way there was also danger: to admit the crime, as it were, and to run away. Maria had Swiss citizenship. The Swiss police are persistent. It could be that they would trace Maria and apply for her extradition. The way she suggested, if it worked, neither she nor I would be hunted. In a few months, after it had all blown over, I could come to the district and meet Maria and marry her with no fear of suspicion. Those were the alternatives, monsieur. What would you have done?"

Lartrec's cigarette was still sending up a spiral as straight as a smoke signal. I found I was sweating. It wasn't just the heat of the room.

"You really want my opinion?"

"Of course."

"Well, it won't help much, will it, at this stage; but I think on the whole you were lucky to get away with it. And you won't get away with it much longer if you start telling the story to perfect strangers."

"You are the first and the last. It was something . . . it came out. I can rely on your discretion?"

"Yes." Travelling over Europe today, in spite of its new prosperity, one comes constantly upon the old sickly scars. "Is your boy—the slow one—is he a Catholic?"

"Yes."

"Then I think I should have been afraid of your wife's scheme for two reasons. I should have been afraid of the boy telling what he knew in confession. And I should have been afraid that the Swiss police, who, as you say, are persistent, might have found something in Zigani's injuries inconsistent with the theory of a fall. On the whole I should have preferred the risk of an escape to France where I imagine you would find others from your country who would give you shelter. But I wish you hadn't told me this."

"And the killing," persisted Lartrec, leaning forward. "As an Englishman, would you have done different?"

"I don't suppose so . . . No. Probably not."

"Thank you." There was silence for a while.

"I too am a Catholic," he said. "The instinct of confession dies hard. But in one way, in the *right* way, this can never come out. Perhaps it is my excuse for troubling you. That and your arriving so unexpectedly, on the anniversary. Your coming tonight—we could not get over that."

I thought of some men I had seen in a hospital in Austria. "I shouldn't let your conscience get too active," I said. "Traitors—traitors only deserve what they get. But I think you have made a mistake in continuing to live here. In this house you'll never be quite free."

Faintly from downstairs came the sound of the cuckoo clock announcing ten. It seemed to bring him back to his duties as a host. He smiled a little, coldly, courteously.

"What time would monsieur wish to be called in the morning?"

I was a long time dropping off. My leg was aching, and, whichever way I moved it, it wouldn't stop. And I thought all the time of Lartrec's story. Presently I got up and bolted the door.

I woke at seven and the wind had dropped. I was almost afraid

to open the shutters, but, to my relief, the storm was over. There had been a fair fall of snow but not enough. The roads would be passable. I thought again of Lartrec's story and wondered if he would refer to it again. Probably he would be bitterly repenting the confidences of the night. I should be glad to be on my way.

It is not pleasant to be guest to a murderer whose safety now rests on your silence.

I'd not ordered breakfast until eight, but I washed and shaved in lukewarm water and stuffed my things into my bag. It was now getting on for eight, and I thought I'd go out and inspect the car. I could hear someone chopping wood, but that was the only movement so far.

It is always a little depressing to be the only person in a guest-house, and the place looked shabby in the morning light. The first thing I saw in the hall were my other two bags. It was thoughtful of Lartrec to have brought them in.

The shutters were closed in the dining room, and the hall was untidy and cold. I opened the front door and stepped out. The sun was bright now but hazy like an opaque electric bulb, and I made for the three pines, the crisp snow crunching. When I got to them, I stopped.

The car was no longer there.

I looked round, rejecting unpleasant thoughts. The wind had been so strong that it had blown away the track marks, and I thought perhaps Lartrec had moved the car into one of the sheds for protection. Still, he should have told me.

I went back.

"Lartrec!" I called in the hall.

". . . trec," came the echo upstairs.

"Lartrec!" I called in the dining room.

They were probably all at the back. Someone was chopping wood again.

I went into the kitchen. The remains of supper were on the table. The sound was not of chopping, but of knocking. It came from the small larder.

I pulled back the bolt.

The boy stared at me stupidly. His hair was a damp twisted mat on his forehead. He burst into tears and began to gabble.

I took him and shook him.

"Where is your mistress, boy?"

He stared at me in fright, blinking as if he had just come out of deep water.

"Gone, signor."

"Gone? Gone where?"

"I do not know, signor."

"And Monsieur Lartrec? Has he gone too?"

"No, signor, he is still here."

"Then take me to him."

"No, signor. I am afraid."

"Don't be a fool. I'll not let him hurt you."

The tears running down to his chin, the boy faltered across to another door, which I opened. There were steps leading down and a smell of old wine.

He tried to run then, but I stopped him and lit a lamp and pushed him down the steps before me.

It was a long flight, and halfway down the boy clung to the side and wouldn't move at all. I peered past him and saw something lying at the bottom. I went down and pulled at a tweed-clad shoulder. A stranger, yet it was a familiar face: a fat man with small staring eyes and blood dried on his forehead.

I stepped back and nearly upset the lamp. The boy hadn't moved.

"This—this is not Monsieur Lartrec!" I said.

"Yes, signor, this is Monsieur Lartrec."

There was silence in the cellar.

"But," I said, "this . . . all this . . . happened twelve months ago."

"No, signor," said the boy. "Last evening."

Then, I suppose, the strength came back to his limbs, and with the echoes shaking among the wine vats he went swarming up the steps, and through the empty house out into the winter sunlight beyond.

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SOLUTION to ARGOSY CROSSWORD (MARCH ISSUE)

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The Black Castle

BY ALAN HEMUS

IT was obviously the potheen that did it, since he had stumbled into the lough many times before without taking harm. But this was in day-time when he lacked the spiritual fortification of the late evening, and afterwards it was no use the liberal dosing he gave to himself—the harm was done, the treacherous chill soaked into his undefended skin.

"Ah, the terrible risk in a man walking sober by the lough," wailed the neighbours, as they danced with hilarious gloom at the wake paid for by the twenty pounds found in the box under his bed.

To his two sons the O'Kelly left the farm and his blessing, the latter croaked out absently before he expired, the former a shrivelled forty acres of the great estate carved out by the first O'Ceallaigh to come to Clare seven hundred years before. Yet it was a snug little farm even after three decades in the unsteady care of one so confused about the nature of liquid capital.

"May he rest in peace, the old soak," sadly said Seamus, when he and his brother returned to the disordered kitchen after the last rites. He was the elder of the last of the line—a wiry, medium-high twenty-two-year-old with the O'Kelly blue eyes and black hair and jaw.

"What now?" said young Liam, but he knew the answer as he asked. It was the problem of almost every generation, and what other solution could there be save the one that had sent that first O'Ceallaigh adventuring to the court of King Dermot?

That O'Ceallaigh had gone into exile in Aquitaine with his king, and had afterwards, on the triumphant return to Ireland,

been rewarded with a rich fief of land—or so the legends said. O'Ceallaigh had been a famous fighting man, a giant who could shear an oak with a sword-stroke, according to the stories passed on to his descendants. Favourite among these peat-fire tales was the one of how he had gained his wife.

It was during the exile and he had been visiting at the black-rock castle of her father, a great baron who owned vast reaches of land along the Loire. One look was all that was needed, ran the story—one look, into which was crammed a year of court-ship, as the O'Ceallaigh entered in the train of his lord and she stood with other ladies in the casement of her bower.

Her black hair had the sheen of a raven's wing and in the heart shape of her face the eyes of her were of a deep blueness that invited like the limpid water of a lake on a day of harsh heat. The foreign French name of her was Catherine.

"You would be Catriona should you ever become the wife of an Irish gentleman," said the O'Ceallaigh, when his patience had at last been rewarded by a moment alone with her on a day out with the hawks.

"It sounds well," she said, and that was all they had the time for before the others joined them; but it was enough; their eyes and the tones of their voices said more than words could convey.

But for a landless knight to ask a great baron for his daugh-ter's hand meant the likelihood of losing his own head. Also, the O'Ceallaigh was bound by the laws of hospitality. So he bided his time until the visit was over and let a clear month lapse be-fore returning to the Black Castle.

In the gloom of a moonless night he climbed the castle walls and the wall of her tower, and she was unsurprised and ready. He carried her forth, and when the alarm was given he cut down a dozen of the baron's men-at-arms and another dozen in the subsequent pursuit—or perhaps it was scores or hundreds that he slew. The legends are liberally vague in regard to numbers, the one sure thing being that in due course they came to Clare and began the long line of the O'Kelly's.

Over the centuries the main branch had stayed home, but the cadets had wandered in search of wars in which to carve their own fortunes, and this was what the last of the line had in mind after the death of their father. But what Seamus was thinking of was a slight break with custom. Liam might be the younger son, but he was much too young.

"So it will be me that goes," he said, and knew from the sud-den gloom on the face of Liam that he had decided right, that

Liam was much too young and innocent to be sent to such a strange, sinful land as England.

A week later Seamus set off and entered his exile by way of Dun Laoghaire, coming after a tedious journey to the foreign inland city where the sons of Erse and of many other nations erected tall buildings or transported droves of dazed people about the jungle of brick, concrete and glass. Cousin Cathal was waiting on the platform.

"There are split shift allowances and the money can be good if you put in the overtime," explained Cathal on the way to the big building where Seamus was to be tested medically and for the ability to read and do simple sums.

Seamus passed, and a week later had passed out of the training school, and a fortnight after that had completed his road training and was given a permit to conduct on a public service vehicle. He conducted industriously, did all the overtime he could and sent money home.

"Driving is the way to earn the money," Cathal had advised, so after three months Seamus put in for his licence, was taught how to skid an omnibus on a greasy pan, passed his test and earned his driving badge. He went on working hard, sending money home and living decently with Cathal and his family.

"When are you coming?" Liam wrote after a year. "There is money in the bank, but unless you come I shall be after paying for help to lift the praties and the beet . . ."

The letter seemed to bring the scent of dew-wet gorse to Seamus and filled him with yearning. He had his notice written out in his pocket, grown dog-eared with being there; for something had happened to prevent him giving it in, a something so curious that he decided to talk it over with Cathal, who was a mature and understanding man with a wife, a house, three fine children and a motor-bike.

"There is a girl on the outer ring," he said.

"Only one!" grinned Cathal, then frowned in sudden worry. "Don't tell me it's that Mulroon, the one with the teeth and the legs. Oh, she's a terrible heartless jade."

"She's not on the buses," said Seamus. "I see her of a Wednesday noon when I do Route Three. I think she must work in a shop and that is her going home on her half-day. She's a foreigner by the sound of her—English, I think."

He had heard her speak on the second Wednesday as he took the bus into the stop, nudging it in slowly so as to have the longer to look at her. She had seen him looking and had looked back with a kind of surprise. Then she turned quickly away,

with a toss of her head that caused her fair hair to ripple and shimmer in a random beam of sunlight filtering down through the city overcast.

"Fresh geezer," he had heard her say, and the girl with her had giggled. For two Wednesdays he had seen her, boarding at the same request stop and getting off alone at The Bear.

"This is bad," frowned Cathal. He added generously, "Not that I've anything against the English, of course, not even Cromwell and the Troubles. That is history; it's done with. Some good friends of mine are English if it comes to that. Anyway, you won't be seeing her again. Route Three isn't yours this week."

"That's true," agreed Seamus. In view of the lack of advice coming from his cousin and the hard way he was taking the news, he decided not to reveal that he had changed his shift with a driver who did not like getting up early to do Route Three.

So when the Wednesday came round it was Seamus in the cab, limp after a morning of anguished dread that she might not be there; but she was there as usual, waving for the bus to stop. In his relief Seamus smiled broadly at her as he coasted the bus in, receiving in return a stony stare as the cab slid past her.

In a daze Seamus drove on, finding it hard to concentrate on his driving and sometimes needing a repeat of the bell before he heard it. At last he was at The Bear, and she was off and walking past him. He watched until she turned the corner into a side road, the bus at a standstill and Conductor Wellington ting-ting-ing furiously on the bell.

"My last view of her," thought Seamus tragically. "She is passing out of my life," but then the extraordinary happened, because before turning the corner she looked back for a lingering instant at the halted bus.

"Did you see that?" Seamus asked himself, and his blood began to rush in his veins and a glorious madness came over him. Jabbing the lever into gear, juggling with the clutch and the accelerator, he whirled the bus away from the stop, drove to the corner and swung into the road where she walked.

She was forty yards along on the other side. He saw her glance back at the big bus cruising up slowly behind her, and saw her begin to walk more quickly, heels rapping on the pavement.

Behind him the window trap grated open, increasing the volume of hubbub coming from the passengers. The voice of the dark-skinned Tobias Wellington shrilled at him, "What's 'a matter with you, man? Is you crazy?"

"Toby, I am mad," laughed Seamus. "There is a world of madness in me."

Tobias began to speak softly and pleadingly, but Seamus went on watching the slim, quick-walking figure and he saw it turn another corner. He started to bring the bus round, but brought it to a halt instead, because the road was only a narrow alley between the gardens of two streets of houses, its entrance blocked by upright pillars.

The slim figure had gone, vanished, and the joyful madness oozed away like air from a punctured tyre. Tobias had fetched an inspector, and presently a policeman turned up as well, the two of them taking notes in little books until the inspector ordered Seamus from the cab and climbed up in place of him.

"Report to the Traffic Office at the double," snapped the inspector, and then he drove the bus away, leaving Seamus standing dazed in an amused and muttering crowd that presently began to disperse.

"It's the sack I'll be getting," sighed Seamus, knowing he deserved no less, and he was about to go when an impulse caused him to look back, and he saw her framed in the gateway of one of the gardens. She was watching him and he went to her, taking long strides.

"You ought to be arrested, that's what," she said. "A proper show you've made of me. All the neighbours'll be talking. I dunno what my old man's going to say."

"You are married!" exclaimed Seamus in horror.

"I'm talking about my dad. He'll be in the house now, having his dinner. You'd better buzz off before I call him. Here, what you doing . . ."

Seamus had taken her arm and was urging her through the gateway. He was smiling, the madness back in him. He rushed her along the path. "I would like to meet your father."

"You're crackers," she wailed.

They came to the back door and went into a scullery. They crossed this into a kitchen, where they confronted the curious gaze of two people; one a plump, pleasant-faced lady who stood at a stove, the other a man who sat eating at a table. The man was big and beefy, bald and shirtsleeved.

"Hello, who's the bloke?" he said.

"You ask me!" said the girl with a kind of despair. "I think he's a nut. He's followed me home from the shop, drove a blooming bus into the road after me."

"He did, eh!" said the bald, beefy man.

With heavy deliberation, he rose and moved from behind the table, rolling his shirt sleeves higher as he came. Seamus decided it was time to talk. He talked quickly.

"Me name is Seamus O'Kelly," he said with a winning smile. "I'm a respectable bachelor with three hundred pounds in the bank and half of a nice little farm back in Ireland; and I'm here because the beauty of your daughter has turned me head and I want to pay court—"

That was when the bald, beefy man hit him. The hamlike fist seemed to travel slow, and yet it arrived so soon that Seamus had no time to dodge before it sledged against the side of his jaw. He slammed back against the door and watched the fist being drawn back—and then, wonder of wonders, there was a slim figure in front of him, both arms raised with a poised frying pan.

"Don't you dare!" she screamed. "You hit him again and I'll crown you, Dad."

"Blow me down—well, make up your blooming mind," said Dad in astonishment and he went back to his meal while the women huddled Seamus on a chair and dabbled water on his jaw. The daughter was red in the face and she seemed to grow more flushed the more Seamus looked at her.

"Don't keep staring at me like that," she said. "It makes me feel shy. Oh, you are an idiot! What am I to do with you?"

Seamus beamed lopsidedly. "Ah, Catriona!" he mumbled.

"My name's Lucy," she said.

"What's in a name?" mumbled Seamus, and found himself wondering what the O'Ceallaigh would think of how he had acted, and then he found himself wondering if the legends might not be just a little wrong about the O'Ceallaigh. Might it not be that the baron had not really been such a powerful baron and there had really been no great slaughter of men-at-arms! It might even be that the Lady Catriona had taken a hand with a cooking pot.

"What are you thinking about?" asked Lucy.

"History," replied Seamus, and then he saw from her frown that he was not supposed to be thinking about history; so he didn't.

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Alan Hemus says he is a sluggish individual living in a small Leicestershire village which is most attractive when the floods subside. All his neighbours raise roses and he watches them. He used to do a lot of skiing and climbing but now claims to be much too lazy. His present hobby is walking, in which he indulges whenever his car breaks down. Alan Hemus has been a full-time writer for periodicals for eight years, and is a member of the Society of Authors.

Honour among thieves, they say; but this one had the soul of an artist too

HOUSEHOLD GOD

by John Salt

FRANK Marius Hunter Meredith, also known as Joe the Ladder, was a poet by nature, an electrical engineer by profession, and a cat burglar by sheer vocation. Yet these three sides of a complex nature were never at war with each other since his poetic soul enabled him the better to appreciate the beauty of other people's property while his daily duties gave him the opportunity of studying the layout and contents of selected homes prior to making a later entry by less official means.

A strong vein of music ran through him too. He had married young, for love, the second flautist in a Salvation Army band and Bella, having recovered from the shock of hearing her husband's assembled Christian names read aloud in open chapel, soon learned to accept the dual nature of his occupation. Indeed she was never more gay than when preparing a little packet of sandwiches to stay him when working late.

The Merediths lived together very happily in a little detached house on Brixton Hill and they had a daughter of marriageable age named Tina who had inherited her mother's taste for music but not her gift for making it. But to say that the Merediths were prosperous was to overstate the case; for there were times when Joe was of necessity in residence elsewhere and on those occasions money was short. It is a well-known fact that Her Majesty's Government pays only a beggarly salary to its guests. Tina was not told the reason for her father's periodic absences;

it was merely understood that he was away on important business.

But apart from these official interruptions in Joe's private enterprise, there were others that were due entirely to the nature of the man. For though Joe had never been troubled by conscience he was above all things an artist, and artists are creatures of enthusiasm, liable to fly off at unlikely tangents. Joe's particular tangent was revivalism. He had a penchant amounting to mania for being saved, and while under the influence he abandoned all forms of nefarious activity, gave up smoking and concentrated on repairing television sets.

Bella viewed these excursions into saintliness with dismay, for she had to admit, good woman though she was, that salvation came a little hard on the housekeeping. It was towards the end of an eight-month period of abstention from crime that Bella watched Joe one morning as he rose from the breakfast table and went to check over his repair kit. From upstairs came the sound of Tina plucking from a guitar the uncertain statement of Rubinstein's Melody in F. They both waited agonisingly for the final high note which Tina missed as she always did. The guitar hit the floor with a thump and there came the further sound of a large young lady pacing the floor in considerable agitation.

"She does take on so, poor lamb," said Bella. "I wish she'd pack up trying to learn, so I do."

"Mark my words," said Joe, "there's music in the girl, and I'll be drawing it from her one day like golden syrup from a glass jar."

"You always talk so beautiful, Joe," said Bella fondly. "It's funny she doesn't take to it, though, what with me playing the flute and you so clever with your hands."

Joe looked at her sharply but Bella went on talking with a worried frown on her plump, homely face. "But I don't think she'll ever master it and she does want to so much to please Carlo. He says there's nothing like a guitar properly played; that's why he gave it to her. And now she's gone and lost the little things you have to use to make it sound Hawaiian."

It was Joe's turn to frown. Carlo was a sore point. To be honest he had never liked the fellow, what with his smooth approach, his simian face and his patent-leather hair. Then, too, Carlo had an odd, intent way of watching his prospective father-in-law. Often Joe would look up to find that earnest Italianate gaze fixed darkly on his hands. It worried Joe obscurely, for it was too much like having a shadow or a second self that measured everything he did, and in Joe's nocturnal profession such things just did not pay.

Still, Tina had picked him as the man she would marry and Joe admitted that she had a right to choose. But Carlo worked nights, playing tenor sax, he said, with a long-haired jazz group. And Joe could not approve of that, not in his saved state at all events. A man's place was home at nights unless he took his wife out with him. And so Joe had said, and laid it down firmly, that Carlo must take up a regular job, which took him out at nine and brought him back at six, before Joe allowed the banns to be read.

Tina had wept and Carlo had sulked, but there it was. There was no moving Joe once he'd made up his mind, said Bella, and she knew him better than anyone. Also there was the question of expense and after eight months on the straight and narrow neither she nor Joe knew where the money would come from for a wedding.

Joe stumped about the room with a questing look and Bella asked him what he sought. "Looking for my pipe," he mumbled, and would not meet her eye.

Bella produced pipe and pouch from the bottom of her work-basket where they had rested for eight months past and handed them to Joe as if it were the most natural thing in the world. He thanked her with averted gaze, picked up his bag and went out into the sunshine. Bella watched him from the window with a little smile. Later she would go down to Streatham High Road looking for a little something tasty to put into sandwiches. She had a feeling that Joe might be needing some soon.

Joe made a happy journey to a big house in Dulwich Village where he had an elaborate Hi-Fi layout to service. His eyes were bright and his steps were light and there was a certain subdued itch in the palms of his hands and the tips of his fingers that he had not felt for almost a year past.

The room in which he was to work was very beautiful. Joe had an eye for these things. He could value the carpet on the floor and give it a name, and he appreciated the delicate spindly furniture and the silver that stood about the room. The console panel that controlled the speaker output built into the walls of the room was set over in the bay of a wide window and when he went behind it he was not visible to anyone entering the room.

Joe had been at work above half an hour when the two men came into the room. At first he paid no attention to them. Their conversation went on as a background to his work and he did not identify the sense of their words. And then, after a while, he did begin to listen and become interested. It seemed that one, plainly a visitor, was begging the other, obviously the owner of the house, to sell him something. He was quite urgent about it

and little by little Joe raised his head until he could see both men over the top of the console.

The identity of the owner gave him an odd start. Joe took in the rufous, benevolent face, the nimbus of silvery hair, the black apron and gaiters, and realised that he was in the presence of a Bishop. His companion was a younger man, brisk and excitable. Foreign, Joe thought with distaste, and remembered Carlo as he saw the man's mobile, olive features and gesticulating hands.

The Bishop was laughing tolerantly. "No, my dear Max. I couldn't part with it, not for a great deal more than you seem prepared to offer. Money simply wouldn't buy it. It was my one big extravagance, but I don't regret it. Perhaps I am selfish to keep it locked away like this, and maybe I'll leave it to your gallery when I am gone, but further than that I won't commit myself."

The other sounded gloomy. "Very well, I see there's no moving you. But since I'm here I hope you won't object to my holding it once again."

"Not a bit, my dear fellow. Hold it all you like. But remember that you can't take it with you. Dear me, what am I saying?"

Joe watched the gaitered legs cross the carpet to the farther wall. The Bishop took down a picture and disclosed a simple wall safe.

"Are you quite happy about that thing?" his guest inquired.

The Bishop manipulated the lock and opened the safe. "They tell me it's the latest thing," he answered, returning with a small packet. "I fancy it would puzzle any light-fingered gentry if the case arose."

Joe cast an expert eye at the open safe and clicked a derisive tongue. The Bishop looked up sharply. "Is there somebody there, behind that machine?" he called.

Joe stood up. "Just me, your Reverence. I've almost finished the job but if you'd like me to go out for a while . . ."

"Good gracious, no, man. You finish your work. I only hope we are not disturbing you."

Joe blinked and retired behind the console. So much courtesy was disarming.

Tissue paper rustled and again Joe peered over the console top. The visitor had the packet unwrapped in his hand, and was quizzing the contents through a jeweller's glass.

"Remarkable," he said. "I find it more beautiful each time I see it. I must confess that were it mine I should be most reluctant to part with it."

Joe was staring hard, but the expert had his back half-turned

and he could not make out what it was the man held. The Bishop's voice jerked him into awareness.

"You over there, the electrician. What is your name?"

Joe blinked again. "Meredith, sir. I'll be off right away."

"That's all right, Mr. Meredith. Come over here instead and see something very lovely."

Joe rose and approached the two by the fireplace. Now he could see what the man called Max was holding, and his collector's soul ached acquisitively. It was a Buddha in contemplative bliss, very small but of exquisite workmanship, carved from white jade and set on a throne of dull gold. The eyes were emeralds and gold had been inlaid again around the forehead. The statue smiled, and the cloak that had slipped from its shoulders to lap in folds on the golden throne was edged with a design in diamonds and rubies.

Joe's hands itched to cradle the lovely thing, but his face betrayed nothing as he studied the detail of the piece.

"Well, what do you think of it?" the Bishop asked him.

Joe's voice held just the right note of indifference. "Very nice, I'm sure, your Reverence, if you like that sort of thing. What is it supposed to be exactly?"

The Bishop sighed. "It is a Buddha," he said.

Joe nodded idly and turned to the second man with a query. "What would a thing like that be worth?"

Max held the Buddha as if reluctant to let it go. He answered Joe absentmindedly. "Hard to say. A thing like this is really a collector's piece. That means it could not be sold illicitly without the buyer recognising where it had come from." He turned to the Bishop. "What would you say? Between two and three thousand pounds on open auction I suppose? Though I don't suppose you paid anything like that price." He said it resentfully.

Joe smiled inwardly. The expert had said truly that the Buddha could not be fenced in the ordinary way but he had a buyer in mind already and Joe's figure for him would be nearer the five thousand mark.

He said aloud, "Fancy that, now. Seems a lot of money for an ornament. I'll be getting on with the job now, your Reverence, if that's all right with you."

The Bishop nodded rather sadly and as Joe walked away he heard him say to his friend, "Disappointing, you know. No artistic appreciation among these people." The words trailed away.

Joe returned to Dulwich on his motor scooter at a little after midnight. He always judged that to be about the best time.

Bella's sandwiches travelled behind him in the saddle bag while the tools of his vocation were stowed about his person. They were simple and few in number, consisting mainly of a flashlight, a flat strip of metal for forcing window catches, and a small piece of sponge rubber, which he found invaluable in cushioning the protest of unoiled hinges and for cleansing fingermarks if his gloves should split.

He let himself into the music room by way of the french windows with no difficulty at all and stood for a moment in darkness to get the feel of the sleeping house. This was always a great moment for Joe. At such times he felt himself to be truly alive, mind and muscles alert to deal with any emergency.

He crossed to the wall safe and switched on the flash he wore clipped to his breast pocket. The tiny spot played on the dial of the safe while Joe's lean fingers whirled the mechanism, sensing the fall of the tumblers in the lock. The door yielded with the faintest click and he had his hand already on the precious packet when, with a louder click, the room lights blazed on.

All Joe's criminal experience had schooled him never to act on impulse. He stayed where he was and counted up to ten, before turning to face the Bishop who stood in the doorway, a distinguished if unclerical figure in magenta dressing-gown and green nightcap. His hand was still on the light switch and Joe saw that he was not armed.

Both men were dazzled by the light, but the Bishop was quick to recover and the first to speak.

"It's the electrician, isn't it—Meredith?"

"Right enough," Joe said grudgingly. Then, "You never heard me?" he accused.

The Bishop shook his head. "No, you made no sound. It was just that I could not sleep and came down to find a book. I would ask you what you are doing here at this time of night but the reason seems sufficiently obvious."

Joe nodded humpily and set the Buddha down on a table. "It's a fair cop," he said.

"Dear me," said the Bishop. "That's such a familiar phrase, though I never expected it to be said to me. I am afraid I have no experience at all in these matters. What am I supposed to do now?"

"Mostly they call the police."

"To be sure, the police." The Bishop put out a hand to the telephone that stood beside the Buddha, then withdrew it. "But what would you do?" he asked.

Joe shook his head reassuringly. "I'm not the violent kind," he

The door of the safe opened—and the lights blazed on

said. "Anyway what would be the use? You know who I am and they'd pick me up inside an hour."

"You sound as though this had happened to you before."

Joe admitted it, not unhappily. "It's the luck of the game," he said. "You reckon on it about one in five."

"As often as that? But what an odd way to look at it—'the luck of the game'." The Bishop came forward then and picked up the Buddha. "You came for this, then. But what would you have done with it? Sold it for a fraction of its worth to some disreputable contact who could smuggle it abroad?"

Joe hesitated then, and quite suddenly shook his head. He began to tell the Bishop about Tina and Carlo and the money he needed for their wedding. Of course he had meant to sell the idol to begin with. After all, he and Bella needed a nest egg and there was old age to think about. But then a new thought had entered his head: the idea of possession for its own sake. The Buddha was a lovely thing and somehow, when he had held it in his hand a few moments back, he had known that he would not part with it. Joe made a halting enough explanation of his feelings but the Bishop heard him out with grave attention and, when he had finished speaking, bade him sit down. Joe did so gingerly on the very edge of a chair but the Bishop's manner remained kindly and after a moment or two he relaxed.

"I don't know why I went on like that," he apologised.

The Bishop smiled. "I do," he said. "You have the soul of an artist, Mr. Meredith, and what is more, I am rather afraid that you are an honest man."

The description, being quite new to Joe, made him blush and move his feet awkwardly on the carpet. "I wouldn't hardly say that," he said, and meant it.

"Well, perhaps not. But do you remember the man who was here with me this morning?"

"The one you called Max?"

"Just so, Max. Well, that man would have paid me the lowest possible price for this rare piece of work and then have sold it at an immense profit, while taking credit to himself as an astute businessman. That man's action to me is more dishonest than your own, for he fails to see that money and works of art may not be mentioned in the same breath."

"I can't say that I follow you with my head," Joe said.

"But your heart tells you that I am right. Quite so. Which brings me back to my original problem. What am I to do with you now?"

It was not in Joe to plead. He sat up very straight with his

arms folded and stared inflexibly at the Bishop. "That's for you to decide," he said.

"Very true, very true," returned the Bishop. "Shall we take another look at our mutual friend? Perhaps he can suggest a solution." He unwrapped the Buddha and placed it again upon the table beside the telephone. Both men gazed at the emerald eyes of the figurine, while a Meissen clock ticked loudly over the fireplace. The Bishop sighed, and said after a long pause, "I am prepared to bargain."

Joe was mystified. "To bargain?"

"That is what I said, Mr. Meredith. You see, after this evening's adventure I have lost my faith in this safe. I will be brief with you. If you can tell me where to put this little statue for safety from your friends, I am in return prepared to let you go and say no more about it."

"I don't believe it," Joe said.

"Nonetheless it is true. Now tell me. Where am I to hide it?"

Joe pursed his lips. "It's a lot you're asking," he said. He got up and paced the room, turning at last with sudden decision: "Look here, your Reverence. If I was to tell you a trade secret, would you give me your word not to split to a living soul?"

"I am your man, Mr. Meredith. Now speak out."

"Well, all right. Here's my advice. Don't hide it at all. Just shove it up there on the mantelpiece along with the other knicknacks for everybody to see."

"But surely that would be asking for it to be stolen?"

"Not a bit of it," Joe returned imperturbably. "That's the trouble with you householders. You put your valuables where we expect to find them, in a safe place. Leave 'em out in the open and it stands to reason they can't be valuable. So we leave them alone."

"You amaze me."

"Nothing to it really. Take this Buddha now. There isn't hardly half a dozen in my line of country could tell that was worth anything at all. Just a pretty little bit of china and brass that you might pick up any Sunday down the Lane to brighten the place up a bit."

"The Lane?" the Bishop said weakly.

"Petticoat, your Reverence, though Portobello or the Caledonian would do as well. No, take my advice. Stick it up there by the clock, and the only time you'll need to hide it away is when your top hat collector friends come around on the scrounge."

The Bishop rose, picked up the Buddha, looked twice at Joe,

then very uncertainly placed it on the mantel shelf. "There," he asked, "will that do?"

Joe stood up too. "That's the ticket, your Reverence. So now, if you'll keep your side of the bargain, I'll be off. The missus gets a bit worried when I'm out too long on a job."

"But of course, my dear fellow. You must be on your way. Only reassure me once more. Is it really safe up there?"

Joe hesitated for just a moment. There had been several jobs pulled recently by an unknown whose trademarks might have been Joe's very own. The police certainly thought so and they had been around to Brixton Hill asking questions which Joe had answered with the certainty of a clear conscience, at least for the past eight months. It was almost uncanny, as if he had trained a pupil and not been aware of it.

But the chance of another with Joe's own eye for *objets d'art*, or of lightning striking again in the same place, seemed so remote that he spoke up stoutly. "Don't give it another thought, your Reverence. It's safer than houses there. You leave it be."

He bowed slightly to the Bishop, not wishing to appear wanting in respect for the cloth, and made for the open window. The Bishop's voice halted him there on a minatory note.

"There is just one small point, Mr. Meredith. You and I both know the value of the Buddha and where it is kept. You assure me that it will not be stolen. If in fact it should disappear I would know whom to suspect. I think it is only fair to warn you that I should then inform the proper authorities."

Joe bowed again. "That's understood, your Reverence."

Joe chugged home to Brixton in deep thought. His interview with the Bishop had moved him profoundly. He was beginning to suspect that there was no longer a future for him in robbery, but he was also sufficiently versed in his own character to realise that his good resolutions might not last. Bella was asleep when he got home, but in the morning she sensed without question that he had enjoyed no success and noted with disquiet that his bedtime reading on succeeding nights was Bunyan.

Towards the end of the week Joe recovered his good spirits, though he did not call again upon Bella for sandwiches. Tina came to them on the Saturday night with good news. Carlo had found, was about to begin, a new job with civilised hours of daytime duty. It was something to do with engraving, she thought, and Carlo had told her that he expected to make a lot of money. Better than that, Carlo was to get a bonus from his old employers, something really big, after he had done just one more

late job with the band—or was it gang? She couldn't really remember. Did Joe and Bella think that now, under all the circumstances, Tina and Carlo might marry?

Joe looked at Bella and Bella looked at Joe and really there was nothing else to do but say yes. After all, as Bella pointed out, it wasn't so much losing a daughter as gaining a son, even if they did have to sell up the insurance policies to come by him.

Joe cheered up amazingly after that, and on the eve of the wedding he looked up from his book and told Bella that having grappled with and overcome Apollyon he was in confident and early hope of laying aside his heavy burden and entering at last upon his reward in peaceful retirement.

"That's right, dear, you have a nice road," she told him absently and went on stitching at Tina's bridal veil. Joe gazed at her fondly and was struck for a moment by her resemblance to a contemplative Buddha. But this in time stirred unhappy thoughts and he returned with a certain relief to Pilgrim in the Slough of Despond.

The wedding was a great success. Tina made a sweet bride and her attendants made a great stir in their shocking pink. Joe's heart opened to a wider benevolence than it had known for some time past, and he was able to support the prospect of Carlo as a son-in-law with a spirit of charity largely induced and wholly maintained by frequent glasses of sparkling Moselle. Joe was not a drinking man but he felt that if Tina would insist on marrying an ape, the least her father could do was to appear neighbourly.

The time came for bride and bridegroom to depart and Tina drew Carlo and her parents into the kitchen, away from the wedding guests. It seemed strange in after years to recall that he had no premonition of disaster before his daughter spoke.

"Carlo's got something for you, Dad. We both thought you deserved something special after being so good about the wedding. Go on, Carlo," she adjured her husband. "Dad's waiting."

Dad certainly was, but a sick dread seized upon him as the tiny, knobbly tissue paper parcel dropped into his hands. He fumbled the covering aside with trembling fingers and gazed with stricken face upon the tiny jewelled figure seated on its golden throne in benevolent contemplation of catastrophe. He looked up at his son-in-law and realised in that moment that Carlo knew all about him and that he most assuredly knew all about Carlo.

"Go on, say something, Dad," Tina's voice came from far away.

"Merry Christmas bells," said Joe. It was all he could utter, for his brain by now had drawn somewhat apart and was rationalising the situation at frantic speed. Carlo couldn't go to prison, not on his wedding day.

But by the same token somebody must.

Carlo was speaking. "It's just a little something I picked up, but it's worth a bob or two, I shouldn't be surprised. But nothing's too good for you, Joe, and I knew you'd appreciate it with your eye for fine art." He giggled knowingly and elbowed his father-in-law in the ribs.

Joe recovered himself with an effort. He looked soberly at the women of his family. "You won't ever starve, you and Mum, not while you've got Carlo."

Tina tossed her head. "What are you talking about, Dad? Mum's got you, hasn't she? Anybody would think you were going away or something."

Joe spoke hurriedly. "I didn't want to spoil the wedding, dear, but there'll be some friends around for me soon, in a big car, I shouldn't wonder. I shall be going away with them for a bit."

"On business, Dad?"

"On business," said Joe, shooting a firm glance at Bella and a hunted one up and down the street. "Now off you two go, quick as you can. You don't want to get caught in traffic on the way to the airport."

He hurried them out of the house and into the waiting Daimler. Just before it drove off he butted his way through the driven showers of confetti and rice to lean through the window and speak again to Carlo.

"You shouldn't have done it you know, son," he said weakly.

Carlo's white teeth flashed, his mouth began to form smooth words; then his eyes caught the warning gleam in Joe's. He glanced swiftly at Tina and back at Joe. "No?" he queried on an urgent note.

"No," said Joe, "in a big way."

Carlo nodded and became in a moment a man of resolution. He leaned forward and banged the glass behind the driver. "Airport," he shouted, "fast."

The big black car whirled away and Joe went back into the house to pack a few things, the *Pilgrim's Progress* for one. Later, seated in the front room with Bella, waiting for the other big black car to arrive, he began to wonder hopefully whether they would give him his old cell number back. A man got used to familiar things like that. It was like a homecoming.

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FOR A SILVER PESO

From an Argosy favourite . . . a fable for Easter by WILLARD MARSH

AFTER the long, plum-heavy summer rains that had quickened the angular corn patch and had brought the calabashes to their meaty fullness, and after the gluts of autumn dwindled, with the avocados coming scanty and the old sow foraging among the lessening husks, December had arrived again. Wind pushed its way up the mountain, carrying a chill from the distant lake, but the daubed wattles of the hut were sealed against it, and the brazier burnt in bright defiance. Across its glow, the old woman covertly studied the face of her great-grandson.

Masked by shadow, the frail, five-year-old features seemed to alter, as if the old woman, in a momentary gift of second sight, had glimpsed the male-to-be: a grinning city lout drunkenly whooping his horse down his fiancée's street and firing his pistol to impress her with his manhood; and for feed for his horse, bullets for his pistol, liquor for his zest, and the fiesta for his bride, he would undergo a constant, frenzied pursuit of *pesos*. But now, stuffed with the supper that the land yielded freely or the neighbours bartered, innocent of itches, the boy played in contentment with the thing that would one day lure him from her. It was a silver *peso* given him yesterday by his Uncle Nacho, her shiftless grandson who had climbed the mountain for the anniversary of the burial of his sister, the boy's mother. She had died last year of the fits, four years after returning from Jocotepec to give birth to a fatherless child.

"What shall I buy with my *peso, abuelita*?" the boy finally asked.

It was the question she had been anticipating all day.

"Buy?" the old woman said dubiously. "Let me see it." She hefted the coin with the engraving of a vulture attempting to devour a snake, ran an arthritic finger over the lettering that

neither of them could read. Then she raised it up to her mouth. "Is it savoury to eat?"

"No," the boy giggled.

"Ah, then it is a seed of some kind. If you plant it in the ground, it will grow."

"No, it won't!"

"No? Then it must be that you can cook in it. Has your *peso* the capacity to hold a chicken stew?"

"No!" the boy laughed explosively.

"Then it is worth nothing in this village." She threw it back to him in contempt. "People are not crazy here. To exchange your *peso*, you must go to the city where the crazy ones live, like your Uncle Nacho."

The words were harsher than she had intended, but the old woman had been racked with jealousy all day before at the sight of the boy eagerly trailing after Nacho and ingesting his lies like a famished weasel at a pullet's throat.

The boy looked as if he had been slapped. His mouth, still wide from laughter, began quivering. "I shall!" he cried. "I shall buy what I want in the city with my *peso*, and when it is all spent I shall live with Uncle Nacho."

"Go, then. And see if the city wastes you into nothing as it did your mother."

"I don't care! I shall leave tomorrow."

Gripping the peso in his fist, as if defying her to pry it from him, he rolled over on his stomach. The old woman watched him from the isolation of her separate hurt, picturing him working down the mountain, below which Lake Chapala began its vast spread in the tumbling distances. On its shores were cities with hundreds of inhabitants in each, and at the other end sprawled Chapala itself, its broad, cobbled streets lined with handsome houses of adobe and now and then the *carriages that she remembered from her girlhood—all replaced* by machines, if rogues like Nacho could be believed.

Numberless swarms of vendors sold the superfluities of life to one another by a system of hours of labouring for others than oneself.

And somewhere beyond Chapala there lay even grander cities, till one reached the very capital of Mexico, which could swallow ten Chapalas and not even feel a bellyache. And still beyond, across an ocean in which ten Lake Chapalas would be lost, lay entire other countries—Spain, China, and that of the English, a land of Protestant millionaires where no-one ever had to labour .... Ay, it was a huge and growing world, and

the total anonymity of it frightened her. But to a young boy, secure in his vitality and ignorance, it represented opportunity.

He wouldn't leave tomorrow, of course, but in the ruins of the church his future could be read as in the dregs of a teacup. It had been years since the village could support a priest, the people had diminished so. Priests used to visit every year, to perform marriages and administer other sacraments, but now there were too few young people left to be worth a padre's efforts. The last one had trekked in when Nacho and his sister had been baptised (the older grandchildren had by then departed), and it was evident that there would be no others.

Suddenly the old woman had a vision of herself abandoned, her last piglet traded off, her sow dead or running wild in the lowlands, her corn patch choked by vines, and herself, in a living graveyard, too weak to find her way down to the lake shore. It was a vision of such clarity that she knew it was her destiny. With a mixture of fear and cunning, she knelt beside the sprawling boy. Face streaked with dried tears, he had fallen asleep in exhaustion from the intensity of his emotions. Such a fragile crutch to lean on, she thought, but all I have.

She began humming a brisk *ranchero* song, and when his eyelids fluttered she knew he was awake.

"Would you like to hear how one man fared in the city?" she murmured. "It will give you other thoughts about the pleasures of the city life."

He kept his eyes closed to punish her, but of course he was listening intently.

Returning to her chair, she tried to sort out the events as she recalled them. She had difficulty remembering things in recent years, and this that she wished to relate had all happened in her own great-grandmother's day, or even earlier.

"Many years ago," she began, "in a village far from here, there lived a wise, kind man. He never got drunk, never got into fights, and was said to have the ability to heal numerous ailments in both animals and people. If he had remained in his village," she said, "he could have lived out his years in peace and honour. But instead, he went one day to the city." Just why he did, the old woman couldn't remember, if she'd ever known. "It was a long *burro* ride away, and when he arrived it was midday, and time for the meal. Consequently, he seated himself in the shade of a mango tree, and just as he unwrapped his pork *tacos* the Evil One rode up on a horse."

The old woman was pleased to see the boy's cheek twitch.

"For, as the whole world knows, the Evil One is found only

in cities," she lied. "Then the Evil One spoke: 'Señor, never have I seen *tacos* as appetising as those. I will trade you my pistol for one. It is a pistol which never runs out of bullets, no matter how often it is fired.' And he produced a magnificent pistol with a pearl handle and butt of beaten gold, which, as he had promised, was a magic pistol. And do you know what the wise man told him?"

The old woman waited while the boy's fists clenched.

"He said, 'Many thanks for your offer, señor, but a pistol would be of no use to me. There is no man I call enemy.' Thus the wise man survived the first temptation.

"Then the Evil One spoke again, 'Señor, I cannot leave till I have tasted of those *tacos*. Here, take my horse for one. It is a horse which never requires feed, no matter how hard you work him.'" And the old woman began describing the horse to the boy, inventing a horse of all horses which could run like the wind and never tire. "Again, the wise man spoke: 'To my profound regret, señor, I must decline your offer, for I prefer to ride by *burro*.'"

The boy couldn't stand it any longer. He jumped up and ran to the old woman's side. "But why, *abuelita*, why? Was he a crazy one?"

"No, of course he was not a crazy one," she said irritably. "He was a wise man, and he knew with whom he was treating. *If you traffic with the Evil One, you are doomed for eternity.*" She noted in satisfaction how the boy's eyes widened. "That was the second temptation," she said.

"Then for the third time the Evil One spoke, 'Señor, the smell of those *tacos* is maddening. Take my purse for one. It is a purse which always contains one silver *peso*, no matter how often you remove it.' And at this the wise man said, 'Silver betrays.' And he crossed himself, and the Evil One disappeared in a puff of smoke."

The boy was silent in wonder. While he was still thronging with questions, the old woman said, "And fix yourself on this —that wise man was right. He had the power of prophecy, for silver sent him to his death. Shall I tell you how he died?"

The boy nodded in eager apprehension and she leaned forward, prepared to inflict the moral of her story in all its terrible immensity. Then at the sight of his waiting eyes, so open and vulnerable, she relented. How could one describe such a happening as that to a child?

"Sit yourself," she said, and when he had climbed into her lap she rocked his head against her breast. "It was a hard,

undeserved death. Few men have had a worse one. The people who beset him were cultureless barbarians. You will hear of it when you are older." For if love cannot bind him to me, she thought, how can terror?

"What was his name, *abuelita*?"

"The same as yours," she said.

"Jesús Gomez Ordoño?" the boy exclaimed in awe.

"No, no. Jesús Cristo."

"Cristo," the boy repeated uncertainly. "Jesús Cristo what? What was his mother's family?"

"Don't fret yourself," the old woman told him. "It was a decent, respectable family."

The boy yawned. "Against all that, I think he was a fool," he said sleepily. "I would have taken the horse."

He can say such things in purity, she thought, because he is yet unbaptised. But perhaps he is right, scandalous as it sounds. For if they could put an honest man like that to such a death, what chance did lesser men have? Though of course the purse, not the horse, was the correct choice, because if there was anything that city people hated more than honesty, it was poverty.

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COUNTRYSIDE

The countryside sings in high chorus,
The flowers sing in low squeaky voices,
But the Dandylions howl in deep tone
Howl in deep tone
The fields that smell like pollen.
The trees that smell like nectar.
Turn their heads to say. "Winter has gone Winter has gone"
Day after day, people come smelling the nectar and pollen.
They take snaps of the sights around us.
In nearby fields
A Junta is in waiting
A Junta of bees.
A waiting for the people disappearing
The bees are waiting patiently
The rabbit is taking a bite
A bite of a kail
A special kail
The farmers own.
The townspeople come in their Juliet caps.
Shout and waving their hands up high.

—*Joseph Chattin, 12-year-old schoolboy from Wigan, Lancs., award winner in the* Daily Mirror*'s 8th Children's Literary Competition.*

DOUBLE DOUBLE

This month Argosy opens the dossier on Mr. Calder in the series Agents in Action

by MICHAEL GILBERT

THE Under-secretary of State untwisted the green cord from its button and opened the buff envelope, signing the attached docket carefully as though he was signing away something important, like his job or his character.

C.D.12 STATE VISIT OF THE RULER OF ——; SECURITY ARRANGEMENTS: *The Minister attaches particular importance to the co-ordination of security arrangements* . . . The Under-secretary skipped the opening three paragraphs. He had read them too often. *It is known that both the main anti-royalist factions have representatives in this country. The Taqi* (*trans. "the Silent"*) *have an organisation which is centred in North London. It is a small, but dangerous, activist-terrorist group. It was concerned in the unsuccessful attempt to blow up the V.C.10 carrying the —— Finance Minister to London in September. It has recently been strengthened by the arrival of a new leader, Dr. Shivastrias. This group is under observation, and arrangements have already been made to penetrate it . . .*

The Under-secretary imagined that a job of that sort would be handled by Fortescue's people. He felt a momentary sympathy for the Taqi. Being penetrated by Fortescue would be a

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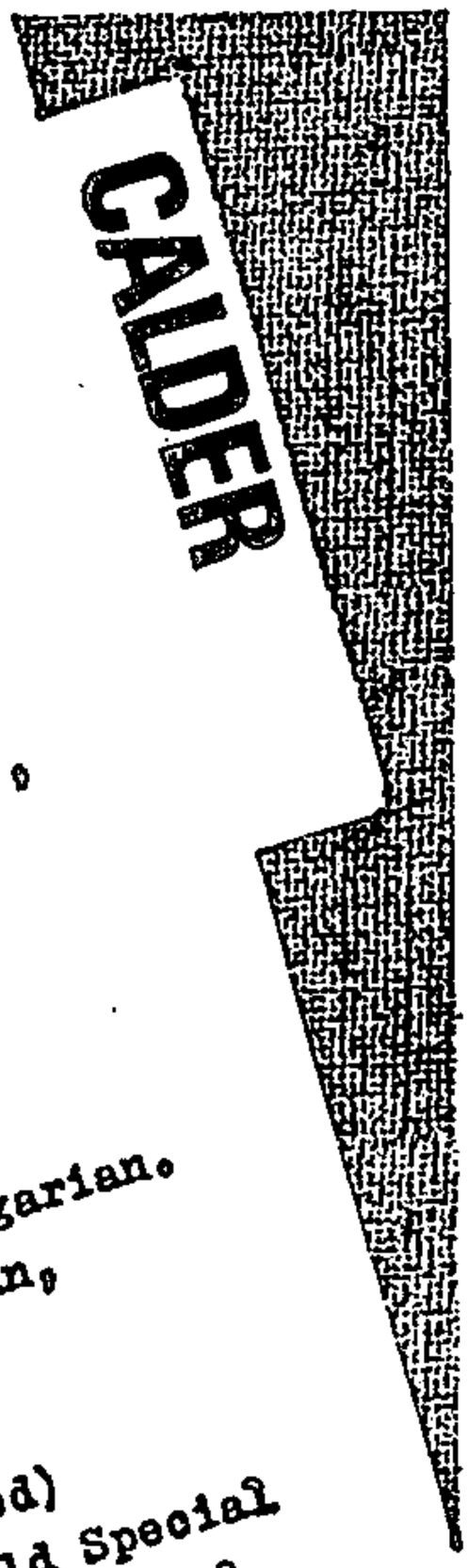


DANIEL JOSEPH CALDER

Born 1913. Only son of Rev. Joseph Calder (Canon of Salisbury) and Sandra Klefaludy (Hungarian).

EDUCATED: Bishop Wordsworth's School, Salisbury, and Universita di Perugia.

REUTERS Foreign Correspondent Athens (1932), Budapest (1934), Baghdad (1937), Bucharest (Head Office) (1938).

RECRUITED to M.I.6 1935.

LANGUAGES: (A) Standard - Albanian, Hungarian.
(B) Standard - Greek, Italian, Arabic, Russian.

WAR SERVICE: (partly still classified)
1939-41 at Blenheim and Hatfield Special Interrogation Centres. 1944 Member of British Military Mission to Albania.

JOINED J.S.S.I.S. (E) June 1958.

SPECIAL INTERESTS: Small arms; cello; History of the Peninsular War.

CLUB: R.A.C.

RESIDENCE: The Cottage, Hyde Hill, near Lemperdown, Kent. Tel: (ex-directory).

BLOOD GROUP: AB Rh+

very uncomfortable experience. Probably be fatal in the long run.

. . . The second group, known as Colonni (trans. "the Twelve") is receiving assistance from a certain Middle Eastern government and is operating under cover of its embassy in London. It will, therefore, be more difficult to penetrate. This is not important since (for reasons, see my C.D.11) they are, at the moment, co-operating fully with our security forces . . .

The Under-secretary sighed. It was all very confusing. He was glad that the docket was marked to him FOR INFORMATION and not FOR ACTION. He was not a man of action. He probably owed his present commitments to the fact that he had won a half-blue for chess at Oxford. He remembered the attempt on the —— Finance Minister. The bomb had been spotted at Beirut and removed from the baggage compartment of the V.C.10 a few minutes before the plane was due to leave. He himself had been on the plane, and had been told about the incident when they landed at Heathrow. He had sweated, in his official car, all the way from London Airport to Whitehall.

"And *why* did you assault him?" asked Mr. Power, the High-side Magistrate.

The prisoner, a stocky man wearing grey-blue flannel trousers held up by a length of tarred cord, a khaki shirt, and a tie loaned to him by the head gaoler for the occasion, said, "Yaroop glubby yarab."

The Court Missioner said, "I think, your Honour, that the accused is trying to explain that he struck this man because he was an Arab."

"Is the accused English?"

"I understand so."

"Then why doesn't he speak English?"

"When he gets excited he has trouble with his speech. I've had one or two talks with him, and I can usually understand what he says."

"Then you'd better act as interpreter," said Mr. Power. "Ask him why he goes round assaulting harmless Arabs."

The accused seemed to have understood this. His face, which was very red, turned white with the suddenness of a neon sign switching colour. He shouted, "Twenty stripes. Been in the Royal Navy. Strung up and flogged. Look, I'll show you." He started to take off his shirt.

"Stop that at once," said Mr. Power. "Officer, stop the prisoner undressing. I won't have it. If there's any more of this

behaviour, he'll have to be handcuffed. Now—Gavigan—that's your name, isn't it?"

The man nodded. His excitement seemed to be subsiding.

"You say you were flogged in the Royal Navy. That's impossible. Flogging was abolished in the Navy more than a hundred years ago."

Mr. Power managed to say this in a way which implied that he thought it was a great pity.

The Missioner said, "I gather what happened, sir, was that he deserted his ship some years ago, in this Arab State. He got into trouble over a native girl he was living with. He was arrested, and flogged. It was rather primitive then. That was before oil was discovered—in the reign of the present ruler's father."

At the back of the dark court-room Dr. Shivastrias stirred on his perch. He had been assured that his own case, a trivial matter of parking regulations, would be one of the first to be dealt with. He had agreed to plead guilty. He had already been squatting for an hour on one of the penitential benches which had been designed to discourage the public from listening to Mr. Power dispensing justice. Now, suddenly, he was no longer bored or irritated. He was interested.

Dr. Shivastrias was a clever man, and like many clever men, knew when to give impulse its head. So now he sat forward and listened.

"It was hardly a trivial assault," Mr. Power was saying.

"Well, no," said the Missioner.

"The accused was working as a dish-washer in a café, with the Arab he assaulted?"

"The Arab was a vegetable hand."

"As I understand the matter," said Mr. Power, in the tone he reserved for his rare official jokes, "he was very nearly *minus* a vegetable hand. The accused attempted to push him into the potato-peeling machine. He could easily have lost some of his fingers."

"I'm afraid that is so, sir."

Mr. Power said, "I can't treat that as a light matter." He looked at Gavigan who looked back at him, without insolence, but without any real interest. His thoughts seemed to be elsewhere. Possibly he was thinking of the Arab girl for whom he had suffered stripes.

Mr. Power made up his mind.

"I want a medical report," he said. "Stand remanded for seven days. Bail fifty pounds."

The Inspector who was prosecuting said, "On his own recognizance?" There was definitely a question mark at the end of it.

"Well—no. I suppose I can hardly do that."

"Excuse me, your Honour . . ."

Dr. Shivastrias was on his feet. "I would be prepared to give bail—that is a bond, is it not?—of fifty pounds for this man."

Mr. Power conferred with the Clerk of the Court. Then he said, "You are a householder? And a doctor?"

"That is so, your Honour."

"I understand that you have some sort of nursing-home? Would it be your intention to look after the prisoner until he is brought up here again?"

"That would be my intention."

"Well, it's very good of you," said Mr. Power. "Very public-spirited. Remanded into your custody, and on your recognizance, for seven days."

The Inspector was the only person who did not seem to be entirely happy about the arrangement.

For some reason, Highside has always attracted revolutionaries and cranks. Possibly they like the fact that it looks down on the sprawl of London but is not involved in it. Dr. Shivastrias' house stood within a stone's throw of the very hall in which the First Bolshevik Congress had been held in 1907, and almost within sight of the cemetery where Karl Marx lies buried. It was in a street which had seen better days, but had not taken the final step down into slumdom. Most of the houses were sub-divided. Some were mere boarding-houses, like the one directly opposite which housed three African students, two commercial travellers, a retired Merchant Navy captain, and a man with a small private income and a grey beard, who spent his days walking the streets, carrying a placard foretelling the dissolution of the world.

Behind drawn curtains in his front parlour Dr. Shivastrias and his three resident patients surveyed the new arrival.

Gavigan had a half-empty glass of whisky and water in one hand. The drink had cheered him up and loosened his tongue. He was apparently only inarticulate when he was angry. Like a car stalling if you overchoked the engine, thought the Doctor. He found the symptom interesting.

"Let me introduce my house-guests," he said. "This is Abaf." Abaf had a squat, rounded figure; seated, he looked like a Buddha. In motion, he had some of the bounce and thrust of a good half-back. His face was seamed and twisted with what

looked like wrinkles. It was only when you looked closer that you saw they were deep-lying scars. "And Djuma." Djuma was huge, fat and sad. He spoke awkwardly, having only the stump of a tongue. "And Khalid." This was a sharp little man with the appearance of an accountant. He wore steel glasses. On the rare occasions that he smiled, the gold fillings in his teeth gleamed like the sun breaking unexpectedly through cloud.

"All of us have one thing in common." The Doctor's sweeping gesture included Gavigan. "We have all suffered. My friends, Abaf and Djuma, have been tortured by the hirelings of the Ruler. Abaf with hot irons. Djuma, when he would tell them nothing, had the fore part of his tongue cut off."

"The swine," said Gavigan. His face, the Doctor noticed, was starting to go red again.

"For that reason, and for many other reasons, we propose to destroy him."

"All right talking," said Gavigan. "He's safe in his own country. Can't get at him."

"But you are wrong," said the Doctor. "He is in England at this moment."

It really was interesting, he thought. The tide of red turned to scarlet and then to purple as the small veins in the face engorged.

"He arrived two days ago on a state visit. In three days more he will depart."

Gavigan was on his feet, mouthing incomprehensibilities. He moved across the room, lunging out, like someone playing blind-man's-bluff and beginning to get angry. The four men watched him. Dr. Shivastrias wore contact lenses which glittered coldly as he turned his head . . .

That evening, with Gavigan safely in bed, they considered the matter again.

"Clearly the man who throws the bomb runs a great risk of being caught," said the Doctor. "If that man is Gavigan, his record will shield us. He has a personal animosity—"

"Can he be trusted to do the job properly?" said Khalid. Of the three, he was the only one who would have questioned his leader.

"It is a simple task. It demands no finesse."

"We shall have to obtain authority."

"Certainly. A message shall go tomorrow, by the emergency route. You must take it, Abaf. The answer will come the day after. Today is Tuesday. The old man does not terminate his visit until Friday. There is time."

"Can we keep Gavigan quiet until then?"

"He smokes the weed," said Abaf. "I know the signs. Give him enough of the weed, and he'll sleep until Friday."

The Doctor considered the matter. He knew as well as any of them the properties of bhang, which is both a drug and a medicine.

He said, "We will try a small dose tomorrow. Much depends on how accustomed he is to it. We want no mistakes."

At ten o'clock the next morning Abaf, dressed in dark blue airline overalls, rode his motor scooter into London Airport. He rode, without even troubling to slow down, through two gateways, both of which were labelled STRICTLY PRIVATE: AIRPORT PERSONNEL ONLY: ALL PASSES MUST BE SHOWN and propped up his scooter outside the back door of the canteen building. Abaf walked through it with the air of privilege which is more effective than any number of passes, and made his way up the passage to a clatter of dishes which announced the kitchen. He opened the door, and stood for a moment, surveying the scene. He said something to a kitchen hand who was hurrying past and the man pointed to a good-looking black-haired boy, dressed in the uniform of a waiter. The boy had picked up a tray, and was coming towards them. Abaf backed out into the passage. For a moment he and the boy were alone. Nothing was said, but an envelope passed from hand to hand; the boy sped on down the passage.

Abaf went back to his scooter and returned by the way he had come. He would have liked to have cadged breakfast from one of his compatriots in the kitchen, but knew enough not to overplay his luck.

The young waiter carried his tray into the crew quarters where four complete crews and members of half-a-dozen others were having breakfast. At the far table the crew of a Syriac Airlines Comet were eating together. As he served them, he slipped the note into the pocket of the youngest and prettiest air hostess.

Seven hours later the air hostess, whose name was Anna, walked with the other members of the crew through the flight-personnel exit of Beirut Airport. Dusk was beginning to fall and the headlights of the cars could be seen, switching up and down the three-lane dual carriageway which joins airport and town. Two airline cars were waiting for them.

The third officer, who had plans of his own, tried to organise Anna into the one he was travelling in, but the girl said, "I'm sorry, I'd forgotten, I have a telephone call I must make immediately. Don't wait for me. I'll join you at the hostel." She turned

on her heel and walked back to the airport. The third officer wondered, sourly, who the lucky man was.

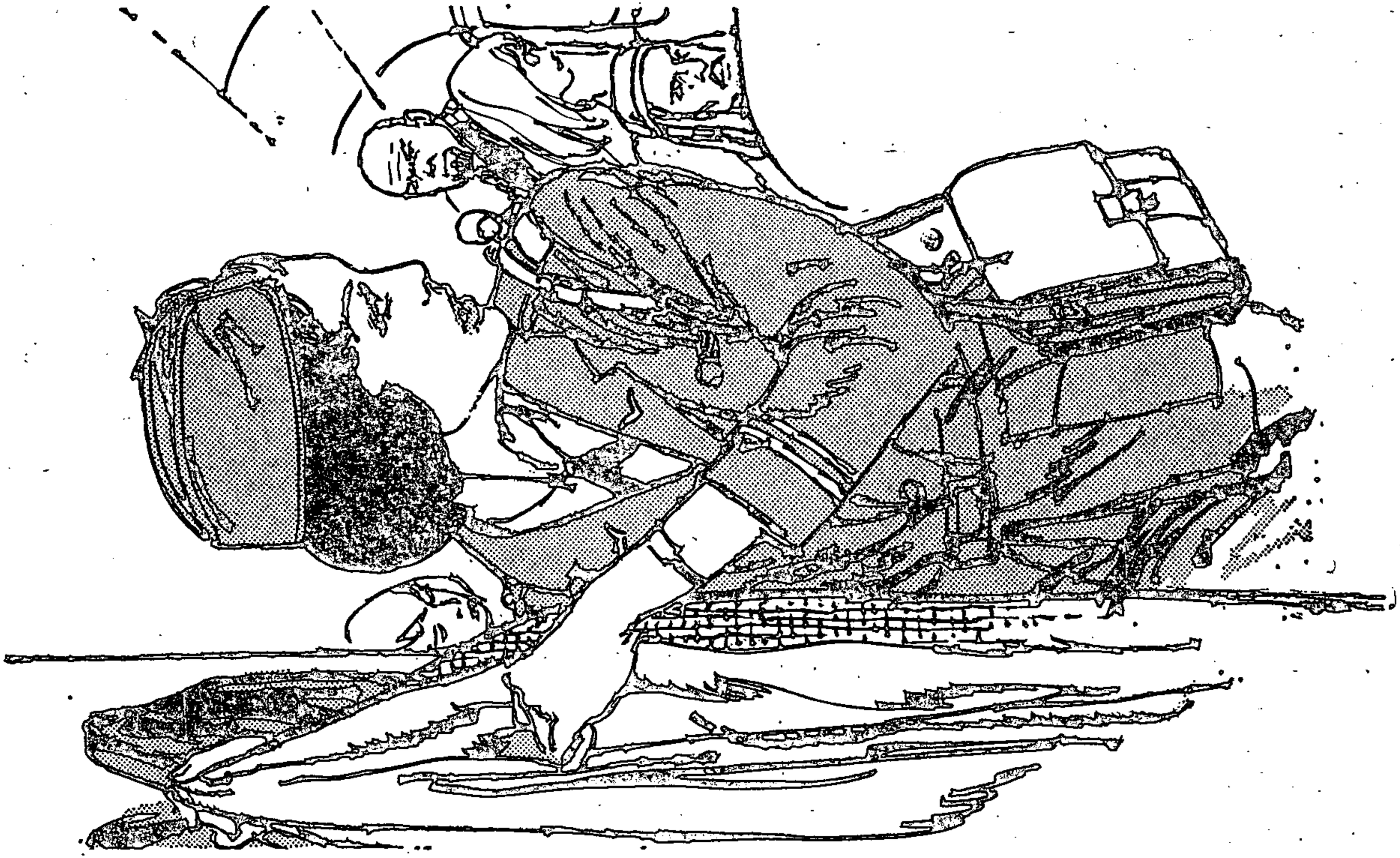
When Abaf, on his motor scooter, got back to Dr. Shivastrias' house to report the success of his mission, he found the Doctor and Khalid examining Gavigan, who was lying flat on his back with his mouth wide open, snoring. There was a half-smile on his face. His dreams were evidently happy. There was also a trace of froth at the corners of his mouth which seemed to cause the Doctor some concern. He wrote out a prescription and handed it to Khalid who examined the scribble suspiciously, and scuttled away with it.

There was a branch of a large multiple chemist's on the corner of the road, but Khalid ignored both this and a chemist's shop a hundred yards farther up. He moved rapidly along the pavement with his peculiar crab-like gait until he came to the third, and smallest, of the shops. He waited in its dark and cramped interior until two girls had made their minds up about a hair-rinse, paid for it and gone out. Then he pushed the prescription across the counter to the young man in the white overall whose face was as dark as his own. As he did so, he gestured with his hand. The young man raised the counter-flap and Khalid slid through, round the screen which hid the mysteries of the dispensary, and through a door, closing it behind him. On a shelf just inside the door stood a telephone. Khalid dialled a number carefully, muttering each letter and number to himself as he did so.

By the time he had finished his call the prescription had been made up for him and stood, neatly-wrapped, on the counter. He picked it up, and went out. From beginning to end of the transaction no word was spoken.

In Beirut, the crew of the Syriac Comet breakfasted off fruit juice, scrambled eggs, well-made coffee and badly-made toast. It was, as usual, a silent meal.

The third officer was watching Anna's jawline and throat as she munched and swallowed her toast. She had been particularly sweet to him the night before. So kind, and so forthcoming, that he had managed to stow away, at the back of his mind, like an unwanted Christmas present at the back of a dark cupboard, the thought that she was only stringing him along and that she had a boy lined up in Beirut. She had sworn to him that she knew no-one in the City except the people she did business with—her banker, her accountant. That much was understandable. Like all regular air crew she no doubt had her money



stowed in different "pockets" in their main ports of call. But if it was business, why had she stayed behind at the airport to telephone, passing up a free lift to the hostel where she could just as easily have used the telephone? Except that the hostel telephone was in a rather public place. But if all she had to talk about was business, why was she being so damned cagey about it?

Just then the hall porter approached the table and whispered something to Anna who said, "Excuse me, please." As she followed him out of the dining room there was a worried look on her face.

Her instructions had been quite clear. Neither to send nor receive messages in public.

The voice at the other end of the telephone was as clipped and precise as a lecturer addressing a class of backward students.

"I regret having to telephone you at the hostel. There was no other way to reach you in time. It will be better if you say nothing at all, but just listen. A passenger will be boarding your aircraft at Cairo. He travels under the name of Ben-Massimo. You will recognise him at once from the fact that he has a short square beard, and will be wearing a black and grey checked top-coat. You will help him in any way he requires. In particular, if he has any object he wishes to get past the authorities at London Airport, he will put it in the pocket of his top-coat, and you will take charge of it. Thank you."

"Thank *you*," said Anna, but she was speaking to a dead telephone.

The third officer, who had come out into the hall, said, "Your stockbroker gets up very early, doesn't he?"

"Of course," said Anna. "That's why he's so rich."

She had no difficulty in recognising Ben-Massimo. He came on board at Cairo, carrying a briefcase which he placed in the rack, and a coat which he handed to Anna. As she hung it on top of the other coats in the space behind the seats, she felt that there was, indeed, something heavy in the pocket. She had her dark blue air-hostess' satchel ready, empty, over her shoulder. During the moments of confusion, when newcomers and transit passengers were sorting themselves out, she slipped her hand into the pocket of the coat and extracted a parcel.

It was the size of a box of a hundred cigarettes, but a great deal heavier.

During the flight she had little opportunity of studying her charge. He kept his nose buried in a book and she was occupied with a child who was sick and a middle-aged man who was very

frightened. At London Airport she saw the passengers off, chanting the ritual, "Goodbye. I hope you have enjoyed your journey," to each in turn. If Ben-Massimo had enjoyed his journey, he said nothing about it. He stumped off across the tarmac to the airport bus without a backward glance.

When the last of the passengers had gone, Anna walked with the other three hostesses towards their quarters. She was untroubled about the package which was weighing down the satchel on her shoulder. She knew that although, in theory, they might be searched, it was something which happened very rarely. The only thing she was puzzled about was what she was to do with it. But she supposed the young waiter who had given her the original message would attend to this.

When he appeared with their tea, she could see from his face that something was wrong. She made her excuses and joined him in the passage.

"There is trouble," he said. "Your man was stopped and questioned by security control."

Anna experienced a sudden sinking sensation. It was as though, walking along a firm pavement, she had felt it shift at the first earth tremor.

"It may be all right," said the boy. He seemed less worried than she was. "I will be able to tell you soon."

In ten minutes he was back, smiling. "A fuss about nothing," he said. "Something to do with his visa. If you will hand over the packet now . . ."

"I most certainly will," said Anna. She felt so light-headed in her relief that when, a few minutes later, the third officer suggested an evening in Town, she accepted with an enthusiasm which surprised him.

At eight o'clock that evening Gavigan rolled over on his bed, opened his eyes, yawned, and sat up. He looked remarkably wide awake.

He tiptoed to the door and listened. The house was quiet. Downstairs, he could hear the slow and irregular clicking of a typewriter, as if someone were writing a long letter using only one finger of each hand.

Gavigan smiled happily to himself. He was thirsty. Public houses would be open. Money? He felt in his pockets and brought out sevenpence in coppers and three florins. It would do for a start. The situation might require thought later on.

He reached the hall. The typing continued. He opened the front door.

It was at this point that he discovered he was in stockinged feet. He had been wearing shoes when he went to bed. He was certain of that—a newish pair of white plimsolls given him by the Missioner. Someone must have taken them off, whilst he was asleep, and hidden them. This seemed to him to be a liberty.

Then he saw, under the hall-stand, a pair of galoshes. Fair enough. He tried them on. They were a little large, but usable. As he walked down the front path his feet slapped softly against the concrete.

Outside the front gate he paused for a moment, as if considering his next move. Up the street he could see lights and hear the sound of traffic. It was a main road. A main road meant an increased probability of public houses. It also meant noise and confusion and people and, very likely, policemen. He felt himself, for the moment, unequal to any of this. The inside of his head was still whirling round in a very curious way. A couple of drinks would put it right, but he wanted to drink them in quiet and seclusion.

He swung to the left, and bumped into someone who had been approaching quietly along the pavement. "Sorry, sorry."

"Not at all," said the newcomer. He spoke in a gentle, cultivated voice. "My fault entirely."

Gavigan saw that he had a straggling grey beard and was carrying a placard on the end of a pole. The placard said, *Where will YOU spend eternity?*

"What's all that?" said Gavigan suspiciously.

"It's a message," said the man. "I have six of them. This is the only one I carry on Thursday."

"Who said it's Thursday?"

The man looked worried. He began to count on his fingers. Then his face cleared. He said, "It *must* be Thursday."

"How do you *know*?"

"Because Thursday's the day I carry this placard."

"That's all right then," said Gavigan. "Let's go and have a drink. Do you know somewhere quiet?"

"There's a little place round the corner. It's not pretentious. I go there sometimes."

"Just the ticket," said Gavigan.

When they got there, the man propped up his placard carefully inside the door of the saloon bar and they approached the counter. "What would you like to drink?" said the man. "This is on me."

"Whisky," said Gavigan. "Fair does. You can pay for the first lot. I'll pay for the second." He fingered the money in his pocket

and made a calculation. "After that, I may have to borrow some money."

"That's quite all right," said the man. "I've got plenty."

It was about an hour later when Gavigan reverted to something that had been worrying him. "Suppose you made a mistake all along," he said, "and it *was* Wednesday."

"Well?"

"But you *thought* it was Thursday."

"All right."

"Then you'd take out that board you've got with you?"

"On a Wednesday?"

"That's right. On a Wednesday."

"I'm afraid that's not possible," said the man. "That isn't the one I take out on Wednesdays. It's the one I take out on Thursdays."

About ninety minutes later, a lady wearing a long white macintosh came into the bar. Gavigan jumped up, knocking both drinks off the table, and shouted, "Bloody wog." He then picked up a vase full of plastic flowers and threw it at the woman. There was instant uproar.

The woman screamed. The middle-aged man with her aimed a blow at Gavigan and hit a lady in black who, without a word, picked up a pint tankard and hit the man with it. By this time Gavigan's companion had got hold of his pole and placard and was using it as a flail.

The landlord and his son came across the bar in a practised surge. They grabbed Gavigan, by an arm each, and rushed him through the door which led to the street, using his face to open it with.

He pitched out into the arms of Dr. Shivastrias, Abaf and Djuma, who had spent the last two hours searching every public house in the High Street.

Whilst the landlord and his son turned back to quell the continuing riot in the saloon bar, the three men hurried Gavigan down the street. He put up no more than a token resistance. His recent burst of activity seemed to have drained him of energy.

Ten minutes later they had him back on his bed. "Sot," said Dr. Shivastrias. "Drunken sot."

"We should have locked his door," said Abaf.

"It never occurred to me that he could wake before tomorrow at the earliest. He must have the constitution of an ox." The Doctor stared down at Gavigan. The ex-seaman was lying flat on his back. His eyes were closed and the smile was back on his face.

"This time," said the Doctor, opening a black bag at his feet, "we must make no mistake."

From downstairs a bell trilled.

The three men looked at each other. The Doctor snapped the bag shut and said to Abaf, "Lock this door, turn out the light and keep quiet. If this man wakes, or tries to make any noise, you will do what is necessary." To Djuma, he said, "Come with me, but keep behind me, and out of sight." Then he led the way downstairs. As he reached the door, the bell trilled again.

The man who was standing on the front step was wearing a checked top-coat and a muffler which nearly concealed his short, square beard. He said, "It is permitted to enter?" He spoke in French. Without waiting for a reply, he came through into the hall and closed the door. He said, "You are Dr. Shivastrias, yes? I have a message for you."

"Please come in here," said the Doctor. He also spoke in French but with less assurance.

The stranger brushed past his host, walked into the room he had indicated and stood with his back to the fire. Then he unwound his muffler and put it away in his top-coat pocket, took off the coat, and hung it over the back of a nearby chair. He did all this without speaking. His manner suggested perfectly that he was the master of the house and Dr. Shivastrias the intruder. He said, "What have you done with that man?"

"He is upstairs, asleep, in his room. Might I ask to whom I have the pleasure of speaking."

The stranger hesitated, as if he grudged even that minimum of explanation. Then he drew a card from his wallet and held it out, retaining one corner of it, as a busy man might show his first-class season ticket to an inspector.

When the Doctor spoke again, the deference in his voice was noticeable.

"I have not had the pleasure of meeting you before," he said, "but one has heard—"

The newcomer inclined his head graciously.

"You got our message?"

"I got your message, and I came here as quickly as I could. I hoped to be here in time to prevent you making fools of yourselves. That man about whom you wrote—it was the one whom I observed struggling with the three of you outside the door just now?"

"The same. He has proved himself an irresponsible sot, Excellency. But he might still be useful."

"Explain, please, *exactly* how you met him."

Dr. Shivastrias embarked on his story. The newcomer listened with silent and unwinking attention. The Doctor's explanations tailed to a finish. The newcomer allowed a full minute to elapse before he spoke. Then he said, "It is clear that I am too late to save you from *all* the consequences of your folly. I may be able to save you from the worst of them. Is it not absolutely clear to you that this man is a spy—planted into your organisation by British Counter-intelligence?"

"But how . . ."

"By the simplest method in the world. You are brought to court on a trumped-up charge. You said yourself that you expected to be dealt with first, but no, you are detained there—so that you will see this man, and hear his story. The Magistrate who, of course, is in the plot, then hands him over to you."

Dr. Shivastrias sat down suddenly. His face had gone grey. "If that is true—"

"Of course it is true. Even his escapade tonight was planned. He went out to pass on the information he had got so far. How much have you told him?"

The Doctor's mind was in such a whirl that he had to concentrate desperately, head in hands. What *had* they told him?

"Everything," he said at last. "That we had plans to kill the Ruler . . . that he could help us."

"You told him how you planned to do it? And where?"

"I fear so, yes. The bomb was shown to him," the Doctor gestured towards the sideboard. "Also, that we had hired a little office overlooking the street to Victoria along which the Ruler will pass, on his way to the station when he goes to Paris."

"I see," said the newcomer. "That is unfortunate. Nevertheless, it may not be fatal to the plan. I followed the man when he left this house tonight. From the moment he left it, he was in the company of another man—a religious fanatic, I would judge. He was never alone. In my view, he staged the disturbance in the public house to throw this man off so that he could telephone to his employers. But then he ran into you."

"In that case," said Dr. Shivastrias, with relief, "we can make sure that he never does speak."

The newcomer smiled. "Do I understand that it is now your intention to kill him?"

"Of course."

"How fortunate that I was sent to you. To leave a corpse behind would be stupid and unnecessary. I do not know what your plans are. I imagine that the four of you are returning

to join the glorious Revolution? Your flight has been booked? Perhaps you plan to be actually at the airport awaiting a telephone message that your attempt has succeeded?"

"Such is our plan," said Dr. Shivastrias, slowly. "It was for this reason that we sought another hand to throw the bomb. It was feared that the man who threw it would be seen to do so, and would have very little chance of escape."

"I agree with your reasoning," said the newcomer. He reached out for his coat and extracted from its large side-pocket a neatly-wrapped package. As he spoke he was breaking the seals and removing the wrappings. "No bomb will be thrown. The method was always clumsy, and is now unnecessary. I have brought over for you a much more effective weapon." He had the wrappings off now, and handed the Doctor what looked like an ordinary camera.

"Be very careful. Do nothing until I tell you. Now, press the side button—that's right—and open up the camera. Externally, it works in a normal way. The sighting apparatus is contained in those two square lenses. You look through one. The object is seen in the other. The only difference you will note—yes, you can look through it—is that the second lens contains a crossed wire. Focus the intersection on any object, set the range-finder for the appropriate distance—it is calibrated in yards and is the small scale on the right. You see it? Then, if one depresses the plunger—only I beg of you *not* to—"

"So. It is a gun?"

"Yes. A gun. It fires a magazine of six nine-millimetre bullets. It is accurate up to fifty yards. And it is well silenced—the silencer is in the bellows of the camera. From what point, exactly, were you planning to throw your bomb?"

"The office is on the second storey of a building on the corner of Gunnery Lane and Victoria Street. It is a room with one window and a very small balcony."

"Excellent," said the envoy. "Anyone who sees you will assume that you are photographing the procession."

"Sees me?" said Dr. Shivastrias.

"My dear fellow," said the envoy, "of course. Since the error in this case was committed by you, it is fitting you should correct it, don't you think?"

"Children," said Mr. Fortescue the following morning. "Yes. But like children, cruel. And because they are irrational, sometimes very dangerous indeed."

The Under-secretary said, "Are there many of them?"

"Not many, no. But strategically placed—in the lower echelons of the airlines—in canteens and restaurants. You will also find a number in chemists' shops. The Pharmaceutical Degree of Beirut University is accepted in most European countries." He paused and wondered whether the Under-secretary, who was in a considerable state of nervous tension, was taking in what he was saying. He added, "The people we are dealing with—the Taqi—are the most dangerous. They have suffered violence and are therefore violent. They got their name a great many years ago, in the days when the Ruler's special punishment for conspirators was to chop off the front part of their tongue. He said that they should keep the half they ate with, but not the half they talked with."

The Under-secretary shuddered. He said, "But you have them under control?"

"We have done what we can. And we have had some luck. Their house in Highside has been under observation for a month or more. Then we learned that Ben-Massimo, the Syrian terrorist, was being sent over to find out about the timing of the attempt and see that there was no slip-up."

"How did you discover all that?"

"From the rival organisation, the twelve Colonni, who want the attempt to fail to discredit the Taqi and give *them* a chance of seizing power."

"But how did *they* know?" said the Under-secretary. He was finding Mr. Fortescue's omniscience distasteful.

"They got their information from one of the Taqi. An intellectual, called Khalid. They bought him, about a year ago. He sends information to them through a second cousin of his who works in a chemist's shop off the Archway Road. The Colonni pass the information to the —— Embassy who pass it on to us. Not all of it, of course, but anything which they consider will damage the Taqi."

The Under-secretary collected his whirling thoughts and said, "When you first told me that you had penetrated the Taqi organisation, I thought you were referring to this sailor they seem to have picked up—what's his name?—Gavigan. I assumed he was one of your operatives."

"No, no, no," said Mr. Fortescue . . . Really, he thought, one of the drawbacks of the upper echelons of Intelligence work was having to explain things to Under-secretaries. The Minister had assured him that this one was different—good mind, first-class degree, chess player. If this was the Minister's idea of a first-class mind! . . . "Such a manoeuvre would have

been far too obvious. People like the Taqi *expect* to have agents planted on them. A very different approach was necessary. I knew that Ben-Massimo would come over sooner or later. He is a professional midwife to assassinations. When the time is ripe he appears, to superintend the *accouchement*. He takes no part himself. If he wishes the operation to proceed smoothly, he gives it his expert assistance. If he wishes it to fail, as he sometimes does, he will ensure that, too. It was Ben-Massimo who informed the Beirut Customs police that a bomb had been placed in the V.C.10 bringing that Finance Minister here. You remember the occasion, I expect."

"I do," said the Under-secretary, with feeling.

"At that time Ben-Massimo's employers considered that their local group was not ready for a coup. Therefore he stopped the attempt. Now it *is* ready. His mission here was to ensure this attempt *was* successful. That was why we picked him up at the airport and removed him to a nursing-home we run at Sunningdale. He is very comfortable. We had a substitute ready. One of my best men—Mr. Calder. All that was necessary was a beard and an authoritative manner. We knew that none of the Taqi in London had met Ben-Massimo."

"It was a clever idea," said the Under-secretary (managing to imply, as people who use that adjective usually do, that he thought very little of it). "But what could he hope to achieve? The group was under surveillance and riddled with spies."

"Our object was to prevent them using any sort of bomb. In their case, it would be a home-made and thoroughly dangerous weapon. Calder supplied them, instead, with this silenced gun concealed in a camera. It is an extremely efficient weapon, or would be, had we not had the firing-pin removed. When it fails to go off Dr. Shivastrias will assume there's a fault in the mechanism. But no-one will believe him. The remainder of the group will assume that he lost his nerve and will probably kill him. The Colonni, on the other hand, will assume that Ben-Massimo, whom on this occasion they were employing, has let them down and *he* will have some explanations to make—which may or may not be believed."

"I can see," said the Under-secretary acidly, "that the whole operation is under expert control. The Ruler will be on his train in thirty minutes' time. I trust that nothing untoward happens now."

Mr. Fortescue crossed his fingers—but just too late. The telephone was buzzing.

The Under-secretary picked it up, and said, "It's for you."

Mr. Fortescue listened for a moment and then said into the telephone, "Calder must try to head him off. Have the building surrounded as quickly as possible." And to the Under-secretary, "Trouble."

Half an hour earlier, the peace of Highside had been rudely disturbed. The front door of Dr. Shivastrias' house burst open, and Abaf appeared. There was a fan of dark, dried blood on one side of his face and fresh blood was oozing over it, scarlet against black, from a deep cut on his forehead. He stood for a moment, in the sunlight, swaying.

A grey-bearded figure paused on the pavement. He was carrying a pole topped by a placard which said, appropriately, *Salvation is at Hand*. Without appearing to hurry, but wasting no time at all, he went through the front gate and planted the pole with a vigorous thrust in Dr. Shivastrias' flower-bed. Then he advanced on Abaf, put his hands under his arms, and propelled him back through the half-open front door. He steered Abaf into the living room and sat him down in a chair. In the process a good deal of blood transferred itself on to his coat.

"No time to lose—" Abaf's voice was distant and indistinct, as though he were speaking through a thick muffler.

"I can't do anything sensible," said his rescuer, "until I find out what's happened, can I?"

"Who are you?"

"This isn't the time or place for formal introductions," said the man, crossly. *"What happened?"*

"The man who was staying here," said Abaf, "he woke up. He went mad. He was like a wild beast. We tried to restrain him. Djuma he hit with a chair. I think perhaps he is dead. Khalid ran away."

"But you didn't," said the man. "Good show. He seems to have given you a nasty dunt all the same. Where is he now? And come to that, where's Dr. Shivastrias?"

This seemed to sting Abaf. He jumped to his feet and said, "The Doctor! We *must* warn him. Great danger. This man found—something—he took it with him." He fell flat on his face on the floor.

Grey-beard moved with surprising speed and agility into the hall. There was a telephone on the side table and he dialled a number, heard the metallic click, like the tumblers of a safe, as the automatic selectors operated and then an unfamiliar voice answered at the other end.

"If Fortescue is in your office," he said, "I'd like to speak

to him. Would you tell him that it's Behrens here. And it's very urgent."

There was a moment of silence in which he could hear a scrabbling noise from the living room, where Abaf was trying to get to his feet.

Then the comforting, matter-of-fact voice of Mr. Fortescue said, "Well?"

Mr. Behrens said, "That man Gavigan has gone berserk. He's knocked out two of the men here and frightened off the third. Now he's gone after Shivastrias. I think he knows the place to go to. *And* he's got the bomb with him."

Dr. Shivastrias found that he was sweating. He was a planner, not an executant. He and the Under-secretary had a lot in common.

It was airless in the dusty, barely-furnished little office. He went across, swung open the window and stepped out on to the balcony.

Victoria Street was far from crowded. The Ruler had made little impact on the national consciousness. But a lot of people had read the Press handouts, or been alerted by the police traffic-notices and were standing about now on the pavements, ready to raise a cheer for the royal personage who was going to accompany the Ruler to the station.

Three policemen on motor cycles drove in line almost down the middle of the street. There was a faint commotion from Parliament Square.

Dr. Shivastrias walked back into the room and picked up the camera. His hands were shaking but he thought it would be all right if he rested it on the stone ledge of the balcony.

The sounds grew louder. A car appeared with a very senior policeman in the back, wearing a flat cap and with silver insignia on his shoulders. After him, a closed car. Dr. Shivastrias had studied the order of the procession.

The Ruler would be in the sixth car, an open Daimler used for such occasions.

He balanced the camera on the ledge and tilted it downwards.

It was at this moment that he heard the noise he wanted least to hear in all the world—heavy footsteps, pounding up the staircase.

As he swung round, the door flew open and Gavigan appeared. He had in his right hand a small metal attaché case, of the sort that workmen sometimes carry their lunch in. His face was bright red with anger and exertion, his blue eyes were

staring, and his breath was coming in dangerous gusts. He charged forward, swinging the case.

Dr. Shivastrias shouted, "Stop! Stop!"

He might as well have spoken to an express train. Gavigan did not try to avoid him, he ran straight at him, swerved very slightly at the last moment and felled him with a swing from his thick left arm.

As Dr. Shivastrias fell, he realised why Gavigan was in such a hurry. Another man was coming after him. With a feeling of relief he recognised the short square beard and the brown face. It was Ben-Massimo. If anyone could deal with such a situation surely Ben-Massimo was the man.

The newcomer took everything in with one quick glance. He saw the Doctor on the floor, struggling to get up. He saw Gavigan on the balcony. The noise from the street below had risen to a roar.

Gavigan's arm swung back. The newcomer grabbed the case, tore it from him. It went slithering across the room, straight under the Doctor. There was a blinding sheet of intense white flame; an apocalyptic roar; a cloud of dust which billowed slowly out of the window as the plaster ceiling disintegrated.

The dust covered the bearded man who was lying flat on top of Gavigan on the balcony. It drifted down into the street, where several hundred people, suddenly silent, were staring upwards, mouths agape.

The royal personage said to the Ruler, "It's probably children letting off fireworks, you know. They get *so* excited. *What* was that you were telling me about your last year's oil revenue? I didn't quite catch it—"

The Under-secretary finished reading the report. He had skipped the detailed description of Dr. Shivastrias' injuries, compiled by an enthusiastic but insensitive police surgeon. Since the Doctor was dead, the precise nature and number of his wounds seemed immaterial. Mr. Calder had cracked three ribs, broken a collar-bone and was suffering from concussion. Gavigan, it appeared, was totally unharmed.

The Under-secretary supposed that it was all quite satisfactory . . .

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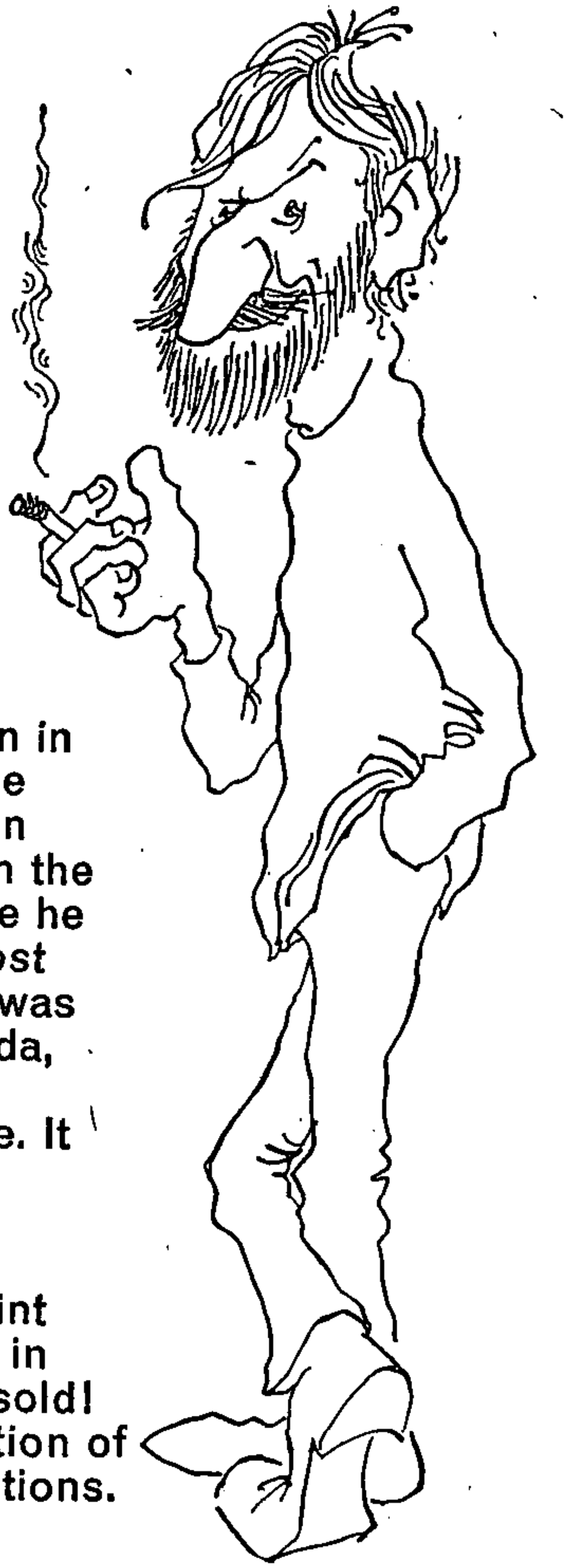
Next month's instalment of Agents in Action discloses Mr. Behrens' part in a war-time plot to murder Hitler on the Russian front

from Paris, with laughter



ANDRÉ BARBE, French cartoonist, says, "Humour is international." To prove his point, he crossed the Channel with a folio of cartoons—and now Argosy gives his work its first publication in Britain. A self-taught artist, Barbe began sketching as a boy. Born in 1936, he moved in childhood from the South of France to Alsace, where he was educated. He says, "Like most kids I wanted to be a pilot," and was trained as a NATO flyer in Canada, later serving in Algeria. Then he worked for a time with Air France. It was only three years ago that he started working seriously as a cartoonist. At first he found the struggle hard, but the turning point came when he held an exhibition in Paris. Not a single drawing was sold! But it brought Barbe to the attention of various important French publications.

Now turn the page for a taste of his work

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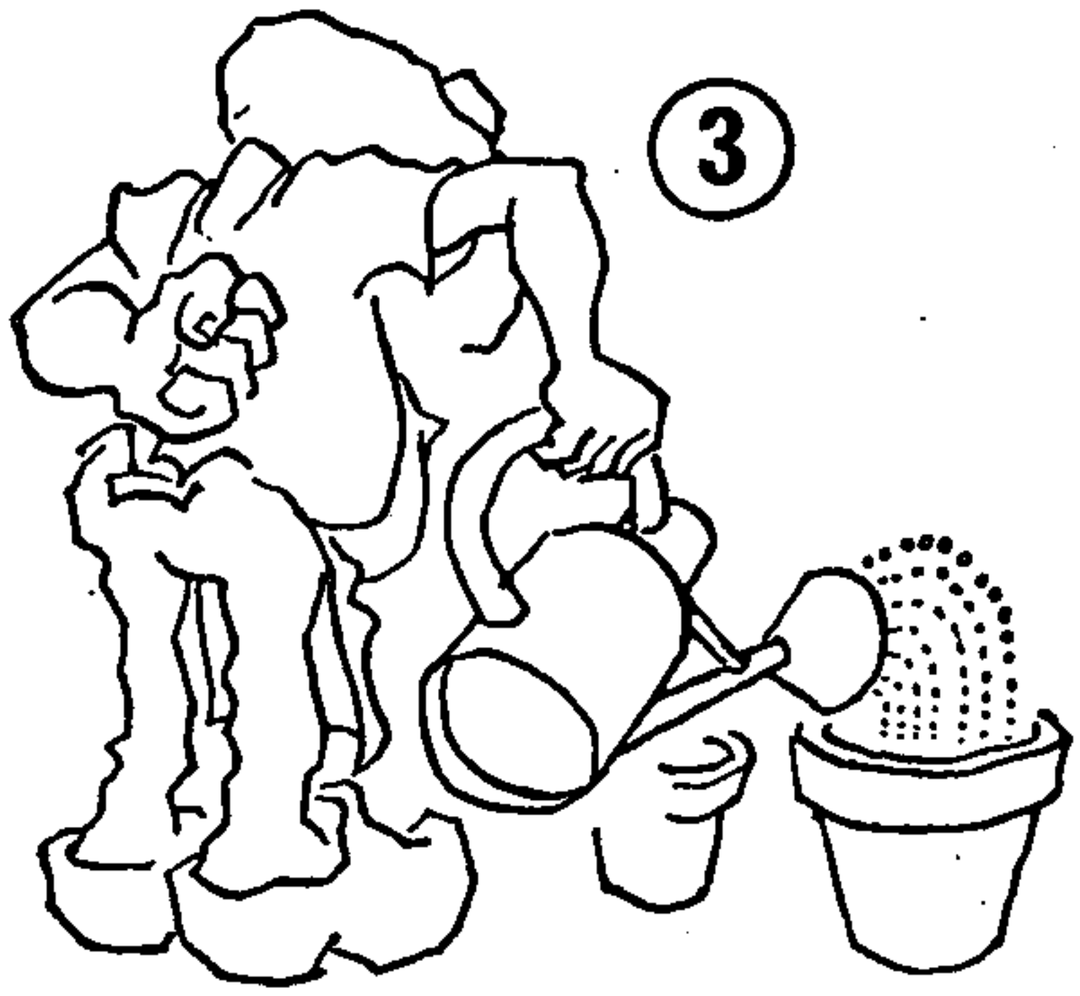

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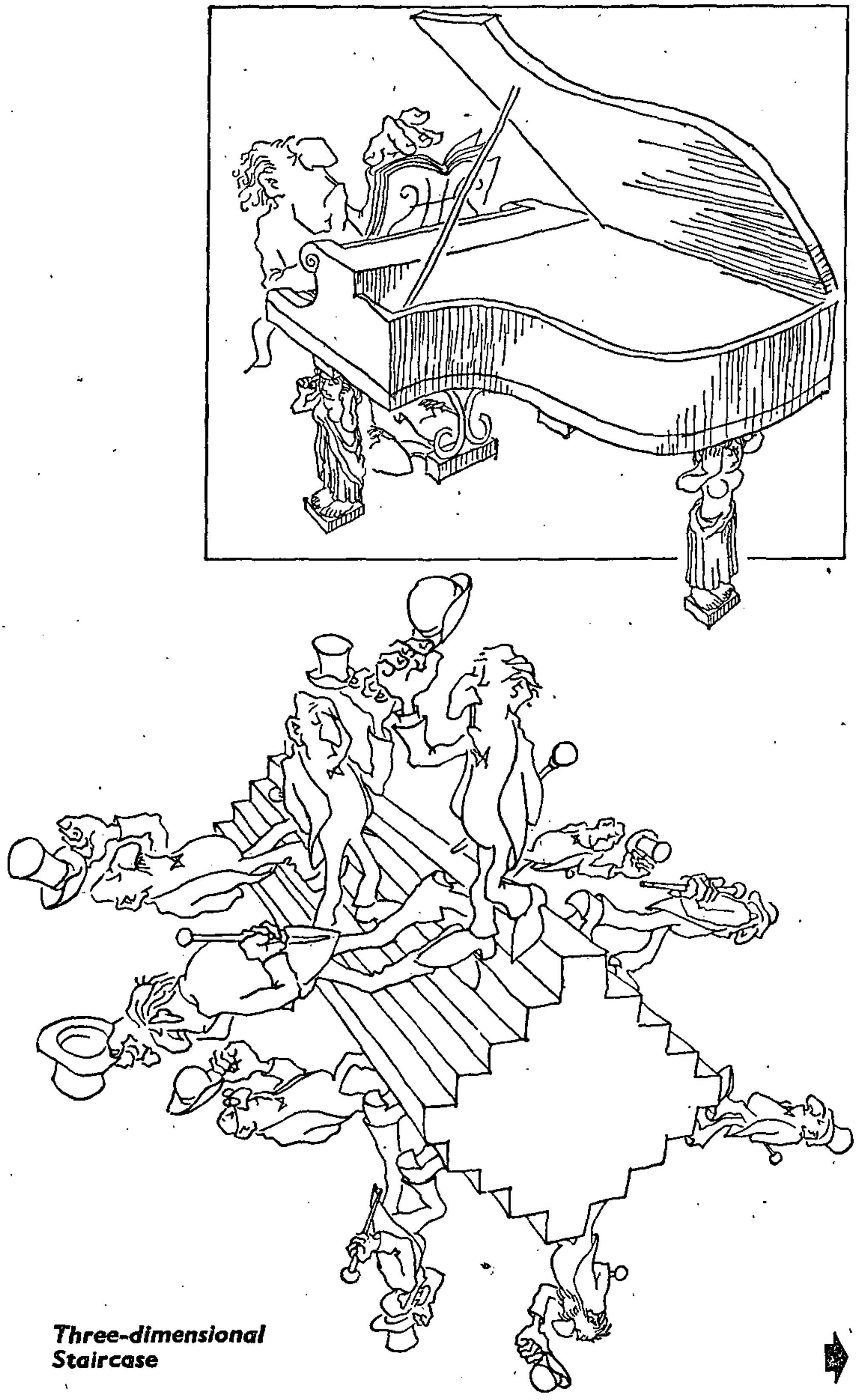

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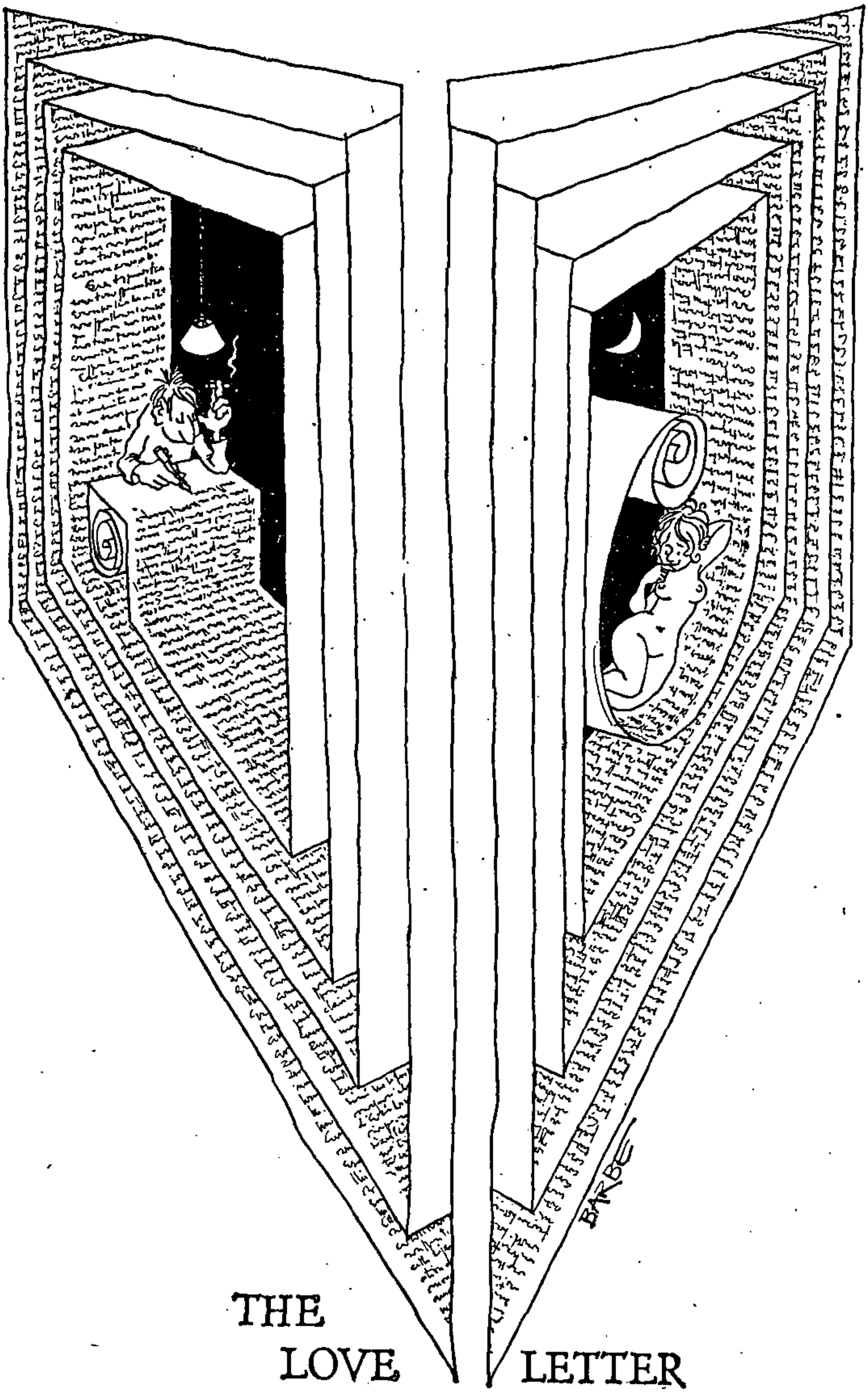

THE LOVE LETTER

It's easier to destroy something than to preserve it

Anyone can shoot a lion

by David Coleman

THE hotel was a rambling single-storied building with satellite chalets in rustic seclusion amid trees and flowering shrubs. West of it reared the Ruwenzori mountains, and all about was the heat and discomfort of Central Africa just before the rain season; but in the European oasis of civilisation with its quaint old-world charm, the daily run of noonday water spilled from a fountain on to a sward of green lawn where brilliantly-coloured starlings and sun-birds boldly bathed.

The white hunter eyed his newly-arrived guest. Mr. Hosinsky was perhaps sixty, thin and small yet obviously tough, but after all, thought the hunter, this was the worst month of the year for heat and humidity.

"Sure," Mr. Hosinsky agreed when the hunter mentioned the matter. "But it gets awful warm also in Detroit, Michigan, which is where I come from. The business I'm in—construction—I often work in ninety degrees and more. You don't get to be a millionaire, you know, by standing still. You got to go out and chase the buck, because it sure ain't going to jump in your lap while you lie snoozing in the noonday sun."

However, after a shave and shower. Mr. Hosinsky said he'd better rest as Mrs. Hosinsky would never forgive him if he pushed himself too hard and keeled over. Also, he said, he wanted to be in fighting trim in case they did get to shoot a lion. And also, he added with a grin, maybe he was feeling his age. Then he went to bed, and the white hunter and the hotel manager had a very friendly afternoon together, drinking and saying how relieved they were that Mr. Hosinsky had gone to bed instead of shooting big game.

At dinner that evening, the hunting programme was outlined

by Mr. Hosinsky. The reason, he said to the hunter, for the two of them meeting in the middle of Africa was because just over the northern tip of the nearby Mountains of the Moon was a game reserve; but there was a section unreserved, just one corner in the south where the river, the forest and the mountains crowded that part of Uganda off the map. And, he said, if a lion happened to leave the safety zone when he, Hosinsky, showed up—*pow!*

"I don't quite follow what you mean by pow," the white hunter said, embarrassed.

"Aw come off it," Mr. Hosinsky said, and then, as the hunter demurred: "It's legal, ain't it?"

"Well yes. But—"

"Look, Johnny. I only got two weeks to knock off all them animals I listed. Which makes for a very tight schedule. Which is why I had to set up this shooting safari on a do-it-yourself basis. Didn't your boss tell you that?"

"Well yes. But—"

"Just hold it a minute. I'm up to my eyeballs in business back home, see. More than I reckoned on when I started out as a carpenter, but that's how it goes. Now I ain't fooling around, Johnny, but I made a transatlantic deal with you Nairobi guys. Okay?"

"All right."

"That's more like it," Mr. Hosinsky said expansively. "Because I got a schedule which says we operate our lion-shooting from right here. Okay?"

"Yes. If you say so."

"Good boy. You know, I spent an awful lot of time figuring out all this. Time that if I'd a used in business would've made me plenty of dough. But a man's got to think of enjoying himself as well as making money. Don't you think?"

"Oh yes. Very much so."

"So I really planned a slick operation. Meanwhile I wrote some nice letters to the Uganda game department and they said all I had to do was obey the rules and pay my licence fees. Which I did, in Entebbe, just as soon as I arrived in Kampala. So now all we got to do is drive on over the mountainside and hope a nice fat lion goes for a stroll beyond the safety zone."

Next morning they left in a big Landrover, Mr. Hosinsky sitting between the white hunter and the African driver, the safari boys in the centre and back seats. At first it was bracingly cold as they went along the dirt road, watching the Africans crowd close to the ditches to let the vehicle pass, the women covering

their heads against the swirling trail of dust. Nearing the mountain road, they saw the countryside become harsh with volcanic shale showing through tuft grass; then they were climbing and it got hot when the sun broke through the morning cloud. Mr. Hosinsky yawned and yawned and finally fell asleep, braced between the hunter and the driver.

As they rounded the shoulder of the mountain, a duiker deer jumped from the high side of the road, landed spreadeagled before them, recovered and bounded away downhill. A pack of wild dogs were trailing it, and everyone, except the sleeping Mr. Hosinsky, watched the chase. Farther on, a troop of baboons were crossing the road, leaving the shelter of a tree on one side and scampering on to some rocks on the other. An outcry arose when the Landrover approached, and some dog baboons paraded aggressively, the huge red-and-blue-rumped leader ahead of the others, forcing the vehicle to stop.

The troop calmed as the females and babies crossed safely, then the fighting males accompanying the leader moved away stiff-leggedly to join the families, glancing back often to where the leader walked about on the road; then he too moved away, more defensively arrogant than any of the others had been. He relaxed when he neared them and was walking placidly past the rocks when the driver blared once on the horn, causing him to jump in fright.

Everyone laughed and the noise awoke Mr. Hosinsky. "What's happening?" he said. The hunter said that perhaps he would care to try out one or two guns. Mr. Hosinsky did, proving himself a very competent rifleman, and he chose the weapon with which he intended to kill the lion, saying that he was such a good shot because he belonged to an indoor rifle club in Detroit where they used twenty-twos, but what the hell! Once you zeroed in on your target it didn't matter if it was a lion or a rabbit so long as your weapon was the proper equipment for the job.

They stopped on the far side of the mountain, viewing the plain spreading out below, vast and golden and fire-scarred by the Africans in preparation for the rains. The Ituri forest bordered the south, shattering its thousand-mile march against the western Ruwenzori foothills. There, where the Bwamba lived and where the most eastern pygmy families were to be found, the Semliki river emerged from the jungle, and coiled its way north across the plain to join the Nile at Lake Albert, shimmering in the distance where it caught the sun.

"You know something," Mr. Hosinsky said. "That's the very heart of Africa down there. And this whole joint is so remote that most of the maps are wrong. Them map-makers don't give a damn, so they run the border along them hill tops, which makes us in Congo territory right now, according to them. But we ain't. It's Uganda all the way to the river."

"Yes," the white hunter said. "It is, actually."

"You been here before, Johnny?"

"Not here, no. It's off the beaten track. I've been north of course, beyond the lake at a place called Murchison Falls. One of the beauty spots of Africa."

"Pity we ain't got time to view it," Mr. Hosinsky said. "So? What do you think of my plan?"

"As you surmised, there's quite a possibility of lion being in that southern corner of the triangle. Especially now, due to the grass being unfired there."

"That's good," Mr. Hosinsky said. "If we get to bump off a lion real fast, it takes the pressure off the schedule."

As they crossed the plain, one boy stood on the car bonnet, gripping the hood rail and looking for pot-holes. Impala showed, first one, then another, and occasionally a group bounded into view. Through field-glasses the hunters watched vultures planing down to a clump of thorn trees, and Mr. Hosinsky said if there happened to be a big fat lion where the buzzards were, it would soon be a big fat dead lion.

They were within a few hundred yards of the trees when the lookout scrambled into the body of the Landrover.

"Mingi simba, bwana! Mingi simba!" he hissed, pointing excitedly.

Suddenly they all saw the pride. In the shade of some bushes two lionesses lay, stretched out like large thick-legged cats. Beyond them were two cubs, and beyond the cubs was the mother lioness and a third cub playing with her tail.

"Gosh!" the hunter said. "I hope we aren't still in the reserve."

"We're okay," Mr. Hosinsky said. "After a lifetime making sketch-maps of building sites and locations, I don't make mistakes all that easy."

Slowly driving past the lions, the hunter and Mr. Hosinsky had their rifles at the ready, but only the mother lioness moved, rising to look at the intruder. Then as it continued moving past she bent to nuzzle the cub which was now trying to grip one of her legs between its jaws.

"Where's all the big fellas?" Mr. Hosinsky said.

"In the shade somewhere. Keep your eyes open when we pass

where the vultures are. There's probably a carcase there with a young male guarding it."

When they saw him he was classically postured, head up and forelegs outstretched, panting beside the kill.

"We'll go on past him," the hunter said. "Then we'll angle off so that he'll be between us and the pride. Then we come back and shoot him."

"No no!" Mr. Hosinsky whispered excitedly. "First I want for us to stop so's I can see him like he naturally is."

The lion watched the Landrover, tensing as he reached high for a better look. When it stopped, he arose, yawned and stretched, presenting a ferocious combination of teeth and skin-rippling muscle.

"Gee!" Mr. Hosinsky said. "What a beauty!"

"You'll never get another skin as healthy as that," the hunter said. "He's just entering his prime."

Head up, eyes calm and golden, the lion watched the strange object, his tail giving an occasional incipient twitch through reflex.

"Brother Lion," Mr. Hosinsky whispered, "you are tailored just right for Mrs. Hosinsky's living room. Let's go get him, Johnny."

"Couldn't possibly. Shooting regulations. Vehicles and all that. We'll drive on perhaps half a mile and return on foot."

As they came back, followed by two safari boys, they warily watched for any roving members of the pride, but finally, through the field glasses, they saw that all the animals were where they had been when the Landrover had passed, so they moved closer.

"Watch it now," the hunter said, firing a shot in the air.

At the sound the lionesses sprang to their feet, the mother of the cubs half charging towards the sound, the larger bulk of male lions showing as they moved stealthily between the bushes. Then the pride was moving north into the reserve, except the guard, who was now padding uneasily about the kill, sometimes making a still larger circle which took him in and out of the clump of trees.

"First tell me what to expect," Mr. Hosinsky said.

"When he's on the north side of the kill he may suddenly bolt after the others. On the other hand, he may charge when we near. There will be a few positive twitches of his tail and on one of them he'll catapult at us. If he does, leave him to me. Right?"

"Check. Let's go get him."

One hundred yards from the lion they stopped, and the lion

stopped also. He was facing them now, with his head up and perfectly still.

"I'd like to get a little closer to him," Mr. Hosinsky said. "Maybe I am a killer with the twenty-twos back home in Detroit, but this is the real McCoy and I want to be sure."

"By all means," the hunter said. "It's just that I wanted to get everything in perspective."

As they neared, the lion got restless, pacing in front of the kill now, all the while watching them except for an occasional glance to the north.

Sixty yards away they stopped and the hunter said, "Hold everything while I make absolutely sure there are no other members of the pride around. Right. Fire as you wish."

Mr. Hosinsky aimed at the lion which was now standing statuesquely, held the aim for a long long moment, then he lowered the gun and said, "I feel terrible."

"Why? What's wrong?"

"This is like being back home in Detroit with the twenty-twos."

The white hunter stared in astonishment then he finally blurted, "Good God!"

"But it's true! Just look at him!"

"Mr. Hosinsky!" the white hunter whispered fiercely. "That lion is only three or four seconds away from us. And this high grass will make a stopping shot quite difficult should he charge."

Mr. Hosinsky aimed, and again lowered the gun. "I can't do it," he said. And then, in irritation which was partly at his own behaviour, "Why don't the mutt do something? Don't he know we can kill him?"

"He's undecided because he's still quite young. Now—will you please shoot!"

Mr. Hosinsky appraised the lion; then he looked about and stood entranced by his surroundings—the long-grass with the bleach of its early golden growth heightened by the grey and green of shrubbery; the pattern of trees that marked the winding of the river; the fabled mountains ranging from north to south, their soft camouflage—coloured contours gutted by narrow ravines and laced by water cataracting from the heights. The vultures were ugly about the kill, but three or four in the sky were effortlessly graceful. One glided down, and Mr. Hosinsky watched it, and when it landed by the kill, he saw that the lion had moved a few paces to the north and was broadside, although its head was turned towards them.

"You know what," he said, speaking quite casually, "I wish I

had a camera. There's this four-hundred-pound pussy-cat looking at us and he can't charge because he's too dumb. And he can't run away neither because he's looking after the larder. Ain't that something."

The white hunter had forced himself to remain silent, not wanting to spoil the concentration necessary for a shot. Because of the strain, sweat was beading his face and his tan was suffused by an emotional red. "Mr. Hosinsky," he said through gritted teeth. "Will you please shoot the blasted lion!"

Mr. Hosinsky considered and then said, "Aw—the heck with it. Let's go home."

They were silent all the way back to the hotel, then, when they sat drinking their first beer, Mr. Hosinsky said, "I guess you think I'm off my rocker, eh, Johnny?"

Surprised, the white hunter said, "Pardon?" Then he realised the import of the question. "Oh no, sir! Certainly not!"

"Well then, why didn't I shoot Brer Simba?"

"I, ah—I really don't know. Of course your reasons are your own business."

"No," Mr. Hosinsky said pleasantly. "They sure ain't. Because why? Because I dragged you all the way here from Nairobi, and I loudmouthed all over the place what I was going to do to anything wearing a lionskin that I got a bead on. And what happened when I got the chance to collect that lionskin?"

"What?" the white hunter said dutifully.

"I'll tell you." Mr. Hosinsky waved a hand towards the west. "Out there on that plain, I saw Africa like I never saw no place in my whole life. That lion, and them buzzards, and the air quivering with life although it was hot and still like it was panting for rain. Do I ring a bell, Johnny?"

"Yes," the white hunter said. "Of course you do. It's why I'm a professional hunter."

"And the jungle. And them mountains. Even the animal that was killed made sense, because of all that life hanging around waiting to feed on it. You know something—it was all savage and beautiful like it is in Technicolor, but the way it never is in real life . . . except there."

The white hunter was looking at Mr. Hosinsky as if he were seeing him for the first time. "You were born to hunt, here, in Africa," he said.

"Yeah," Mr. Hosinsky said dryly, "except for one thing. You know what would've happened if I'd a shot that lion?"

"What?"

"Every time I saw him spread out in Mrs. Hosinsky's living room I'd say to myself, 'Goddam it, Hosinsky—what did you have to kill him for!' "

For a long moment the two men gazed at each other, then the hunter said quietly, "I know exactly what you mean. If I may say so, sir, I killed rather a lot of game before I reached that stage."

"That's a real pretty speech, Johnny, except for two things. First, my lion killing was the construction business and I scored a bullseye there. Second, I'm old enough to know that it's easier to take something apart than to put it together. I almost forgot that, you know, when I came charging into the heart of Africa to shoot a lion. But I'm glad I came. Yes, sir! Tell you what—we'll get cameras and stuff and go out there again and film it like it really is. Okay?"

"Of course. I'm all for it."

"Right. Some of them friends of mine back home are liable to make noises like I laid an egg when I tell them I didn't shoot nothing. But when I show some action shots like we saw today, it'll all be a lot more real than a crummy lionskin cluttering up Mrs. Hosinsky's living room floor. Hell, the way things are nowadays, anyone can shoot a lion."

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David Coleman's story in Argosy's February issue impressed many readers by the authenticity of setting and atmosphere which it conveyed so strikingly. *The Brave Die Only Once* was about logging in Canada's forest country. It is intriguing to find him describing, with the same ring of truth, the African world of big game and tropical heat. A glance at his varied career will help to explain why his knowledge ranges so far and wide.

The author was born and lives in Ireland. Several of his plays have been staged and broadcast there. However, he is making plans to cross to England where he hopes to write plays with British settings. Coleman has, in his own words, "knocked about the world". He spent some time in the British Merchant Navy and was twice shipwrecked, and used his experiences as a lumberjack in Canada as a background for his recent Argosy story *The Brave Die Only Once*. Coleman believes himself to be the last white man to have penetrated the Bwamba Country, a land so forbidding that even "safaris stayed out of the place". He knows it so well that he can claim, "Most of the maps are wrong." He began writing after an aptitude test taken in a Detroit university, where he was studying for a degree in construction, revealed literary talent.

The Tree

by H. H. WILSON

MOST people on the cane plantations looked forward to mail days; but not Jim Firman.

Charlie Tediger, subsidised mailman, forestry ranger, fire officer, and Justice of the Peace, tethered his horse to a tree. As he handed over the few papers, circulars, bills, an odd letter or two, he could tell from Firman's expression that there was one from his wife. Charlie had come to recognise that sprawling handwriting. After receiving one of these, Firman would be silent and morose for weeks. And they had been coming more frequently lately.

"How're you keeping, Jim?" he asked, putting in his bag a few letters Firman had piled on the table.

"Me? Oh, fine."

"You don't look it, then," the other told him bluntly.

He and Firman had come to North Queensland during the war and had both fallen under the spell of the jungle. They enjoyed their ceaseless battle against it; Firman to save his small fields of cane from being swallowed up; Tediger because every trip was, in its way, a minor triumph, crossing swollen rivers and fallen trees, hacking through tangled vines, avoiding poisonous trees, snakes, crocodiles and fever.

It was against this last that he now warned

his friend. "Taking your tablets, Jim?" he asked, sitting at the table on the verandah where Firman had tea ready. From where he sat, he had a view down the track along which he had come, stippled with sunlight through the trees into a floating pale green light. Giant stag ferns clung from trees; others grew everywhere in natural profusion. He'd felt he was riding through a froth of ferns and palms and flowers. No wonder Jim loved the place.

"As a matter of fact," Firman was saying, "I'm about out of them. Meant to ask you to bring me a fresh supply."

"I'll send some," Tediger promised. "It'll be a fortnight before I'm this way again. But timber cutters are often in these parts."

"Damn them!" Firman spoke with unusual feeling, his sallow face flushed. "Can't they leave anything alone?"

"Oh, come off it, Jim. You know they've to get a permit for just about every tree." Firman picked up his letter.

"How's the boy?" asked Tediger, to break the awkward silence. "Still in the bank?"

"Yes. And doing well. Suits him. Like this place suits me. Can't expect all of us to be alike, I suppose."

"That's so."

Tediger had often pondered this on his lonely rounds through the rain forests. Orchids brought forth orchids and stinging trees little stinging trees: but a man's own child could be so different, it made you wonder, sometimes. He'd never liked Lionel Firman, and when his mother took him south to school, he thought his friend was well rid of them both.

He could see Firman was anxious to read his mail, so he prepared to leave. "I'll be back in town in four days, Jim. Give me a ring, and I'll have some tablets sent out, some way."

"Don't give them to Red Morgan, then," Firman warned him. "If I see his four-wheel-drive coming down that track, with his tree-murdering gang, I swear I'll take a shot at them."

Tediger laughed. "Don't worry. No-one can cut your timber without your permission."

"Sometimes they cut first and ask permission afterwards."

"You worry about yourself, Jim. Get well, and then you can deal with anything that turns up."

"Sorry. I guess I'm tired, Charlie. You know how it is, waiting for the Wet?"

"Sure. So long, Jim. I'll ring you." Firman turned to his letter.

Gladys, of course: or Gaye as she always signed herself now. But it was Gladys he'd married, in those hectic days of the invasion scare, and so he thought of her now. He'd been stationed

there for months, and she'd been one of the workers in the canteen. Always laughing, cracking jokes with everyone. Life of the party all right, and that was the way she'd wanted it to be, always. But in peacetime there were few parties, beyond the usual drinking sessions at the pubs on Sunday mornings.

She'd told him she loved the north, and the idea of living on a sugar plantation filled her with excitement. They seemed to have had so much in common in those days. Or maybe it was the excited, unnatural atmosphere of expected danger. He never knew. But from the moment he'd carried her over the threshold of the little wooden house on the farm, he'd a feeling it wouldn't work out. But he prided himself they'd parted sensibly, as civilised people. Lionel had to be educated and Gladys had been only too glad of an excuse to return south.

He'd sent them what he could, and Gladys had taken odd jobs, and helped a sister who ran a guest house on the Gold Coast. Lately, what with labour growing more scarce and him not able to do as much as when he was younger, the jungle had progressed from nibbling at the edges of the cane fields, to taking great bites. So the returns had grown less and less.

He opened the letter. No sense in evading the issue. Though if Gladys were asking for more money, he did not see how he could get it. How his head ached. He read the letter slowly, put it down and took two tablets from a brown bottle which stood by his bed, and gulped them down without water. Damn this fever. Just when he wanted all his wits about him, he had to go down with a bout. A bad one, too, this time.

He stretched out on his bed, pulling some rugs over him, not noticing how fusty they were. He was conscious of the fever's pulse, afar off. Within an hour it would be a giant wave throbbing through him, a fiery tide which ebbed and flowed, often submerging him. He pushed the letter under his pillow. Time enough to sort things out when he was well. Gladys was demanding that he should sell the place; he was too old to work it any more, and Lionel was marrying the manager's daughter and it was only right they should help a little now. Now? Firman smiled wryly. As far as his son had been concerned it had always been a one-way traffic.

He attempted to pull out the letter again to re-read it, but felt too ill. He'd a hazy recollection of noticing a PS, but adding postscripts was a favourite trick of Gladys' and seldom had any importance.

He would not think of the letter now. He'd think of the Tree. The Tree which had been his secret bread, feeding his loneliness

for so long. He'd found it by chance when looking for a horse.

It had been a horse Tediger had bought for him from the same stable as his own. Nothing much in the way of breeding, but strong, intelligent and durable. Used to this country. When the Wet made the roads impassable, he could get through the most unlikely places. Yet he had accidentally stumbled into a stinging tree and, mad with pain, had rushed headlong over a cliff which formed part of a breakaway in the range north of the farm.

Firman had had considerable trouble in finding his remains, since the ground gave suddenly into a ravine so hidden by trees and ferns and vines, that from the top it looked like a lush green carpet. He'd been forced to cut his way through the undergrowth at the bottom, where he could hear the sound of falling water. This stream joined another in a still deeper ravine, a hundred feet farther down. When at last, filthy and exhausted, he reached the bottom, he bathed, ate his meagre lunch and drank tea from his flask.

After resting for a while, he wandered along to where the breakaway jutted like the prow of an immense battleship into the big ravine. When he turned this, he stopped. At first he thought he was looking at another wall of rock which had slipped down the range and had been weathered by the torrential downpours of the Wet. As he stared, it began to take shape, and he realised it was the bole of an enormous tree, bigger than any he'd seen, and he'd seen plenty in his years up here. Maybe this was one of the Antarctic Beeches left over from the Ice Age. He'd meant to ask Tediger, but something had stopped him. Jealousy? Desire to keep this one perfect thing to himself, like a greedy little boy, hoarding some find?

Fear shook him now, getting a foothold amongst the fever tremors. What if this attack finished him, as the doctor had warned him years ago, if he neglected himself? Then the place would be sold.

He refused to think about it. He was sick, but not that sick. He could still think of what had given him so much happiness; of the day he'd found the Tree, flowing incredibly from that vast split in the living rock. That was not just a term to him. Rocks did live, just the same as everything else.

He'd measured the girth roughly, as high as he could reach. About eighty feet. And he estimated the height to be around four hundred feet. The age . . . that tricked him. He'd lain awake, thinking of it all night, camping in the rain. That had brought on the worst bout of fever except this present one. Resolutely he

shut his personal problems from his mind. Tomorrow he'd be better. The tablets would take effect. He'd rest and sleep until more arrived. He closed his eyes and concentrated upon the Tree. At once he experienced that deep joy and uplift of spirit which comes from the contemplation of something that goes beyond mere beauty.

Next morning, he had fallen into a semi-coma. He was tossing restlessly, when a taxi pulled up outside and his wife picked her way through a small jungle of growing things to the verandah.

"Jim, are you there? Did you get my letter to say I was coming?"

She paused. There was no answer, though the door was half open. Just like Jim. As feckless as ever. And the place . . . same old shambles, only worse, if possible.

"Jim, are you there?"

She pushed open the door further. On the table stood an atrociously coloured photograph of herself, and Lionel, aged four. Funny Jim should have kept these. He must be one of those men who liked to marry but not to be married. He was not a bad sort, she reflected. Just a fool. But fools were worse. You knew where you were with a knave, but never with a fool. They could do any damn crazy thing.

Then she suddenly became aware of heavy breathing from the bedroom, and at once went in. The stale damp smell of the room offended her, making her remember how, during the Wet, mildew sprang up everywhere, even in one's shoes. Jim must have one of his attacks. How unlucky could a woman be? That was partly why she'd left him. She was no nurse. Some women loved fussing round a sick bed. But not her. She'd stuck it as long as she could. Ten years . . . and that was plenty.

"Jim!" She forced herself to bend over him. "Wake up. It's Gaye . . ."

He only moved restlessly and picked at the blanket. Then he resumed his tossing and shivering, shivers so violent that the blanket slipped to the floor. His pyjamas were sodden with sweat. But the fever did not seem to have broken. The stubborn fool. Never would see a doctor while he could stand. God, he did look bad this time. She went outside.

"My husband's very ill. Do you think we can take him into hospital in your taxi?"

"Sure," replied the man, climbing out. "Always thought old Jim needed someone to look after him."

The woman ignored the implied criticism, and busied herself

getting Jim wrapped up and packing a few simple requirements.

"I'll bring the rest later," she said. "Fix him comfortably in the back seat and I'll come in with you. Here's a couple of rugs."

She could not leave quickly enough. The sense of imprisonment suffocated her. She could feel the jungle closing in upon her, with all its horrors. She remembered the long hot nights when claustrophobia seized her, when she imagined the relentless vines with trailers like an octopus' tentacles creeping over the house, having to be chopped off, growing again faster than a man could wield an axe; the stealthy growth of the strangler fig, which closed upon its host tree, with delicate waving fronds, which sucked the life from it, leaving it a hollow shell: the long nights of the Wet, when even the radio was out of action. The roar of the distant torrent in the ravine, which sometimes rose eighty feet in one night: the sudden thud of a huge black bean pod, heavy enough to crack open your skull: the ceaseless drip, drip, drip of the trees. Even when it wasn't raining, they still dripped.

She didn't care if gerberas grew wild to fantastic sizes, if all you had to do was to throw a strawberry plant outside and it produced berries as large as plums. Always she'd had the feeling of panic that these fiercely growing things would ultimately overwhelm her, consume her as some fly-catcher plants did flies, that before she knew it, she would be part of the thick mould of the jungle floor.

She'd thought differently at first. She'd seen the jungle with the sun shining through its myriad greens, with those gorgeous orchids swaying high up in the trees. She and Jim even saw a platypus on their first walk, when they stopped on the railway bridge. It had dived neatly, silently into the pool below.

When you were in love, or thought you were, any damn place seemed wonderful. It was one of nature's tricks. It had all been crazy. She and Jim had nothing in common. Not even Lionel.

Jim had been generous enough, she conceded, but she could see at a glance that the place wasn't even paying its way now. She thought momentarily and uneasily of various of her men friends down south, who had been attracted by her airy talk of her "plantation" up north.

No, Jim would have to sell.

When she'd installed him in the hospital, a new tropical-style building she never knew existed up here, she took a room in the nearest hotel. They thought Jim was pretty bad, so she'd better stay on hand. His heart. She felt pretty bad, herself, if it came to that. She needed a drink.

She went into the saloon and called for a double whisky. The black depression began to lift. There must be some use for that property besides grubbing for sugar cane. She did not need the doctor to tell her her husband would never be fit for hard work again. She pushed back her hair, feeling the sweat trickling along her scalp. She'd read of people finding all sorts of things in this back country. Minerals. Things like uranium, copper, even gold. Oil? Not likely. What about timber? Yes, she thought, brightening, there might be a valuable stand of timber tucked away somewhere. She'd ask Charlie Tediger, if he were still around.

She heard a vehicle pull up outside; the sound of men's voices and of heavy male boots. An enormous man with streaked red hair came in, followed by the barman with an array of bottles and glasses. She remembered him. Red Morgan. Jim had once mentioned he was a timber contractor now, working for himself. He'd been in the same outfit with Jim, and Charlie Tediger, and they'd had plenty of good times together. He'd said some pretty tough things when she'd left, to take Lionel south. He should talk, she told herself. His three wives had all left him. Men stuck together all right.

Automatically her hand went to smooth her hair. She glanced in her compact and thought: I *told* the girl not to make it too blond. This harsh light up here . . .

"Hello." She went across to the man, who was pouring himself a stiff whisky. "Remember me?"

He looked up in surprise, and she wondered momentarily what made men grow so big in these parts. Like trees.

"Can't say I do," he said warily.

"Jim Firman's wife. Remember me in the old days? You always reckoned I was the life of the party. I came up to look after Jim," she added, with sudden inspiration. "He's in hospital. Fever."

"Sorry about Jim." He did not relax and there was little welcome in his tone. "Sit down, and I'll pour you a drink. Whisky?"

"Thanks, Red. I may still call you that, I suppose? Though I must say it looks like all the rain up here's washed out a good bit of the colour!"

"That's for sure." He ran a huge hand through his thick hair. "Reckon time catches up with all of us. How's Jim?"

"He'll make it. At least, he will, if he leaves this place. Climate's no good to him."

"Pity." He poured himself more whisky, and she recalled how the men had said Red Morgan could drink any of them under the table.

"We'll just have to sell," she went on hurriedly, "to get enough money to pay doctor's bills. But who'd want to buy a ramshackle place like ours? I can't imagine why Jim stuck it all these years."

Morgan eyed her grimly. This bedizened, rather vulgar, dumpy little woman, her skin raddled with too much make-up and too much sun-bathing, her hair ruined with too many "perms" and rinses, had never attracted him very much, even at those parties she was recalling with so much regret. Often he'd wondered what Jim had seen in her. Oh, well, these war-time marriages. Trouble with most dames, he reflected, was that they couldn't love big things, like places and forests and rivers: only little trumpery things they could hold in their hands. And you couldn't explain to them.

"Reckon he liked the place," he commented, with a wave of his hand, large and calloused and covered with a mat of thick red hairs, which had not faded like those on his head. A wood-cutter's hand, thought the woman, noting the powerful fingers. His shirt was opened nearly to the waist, and his chest matted.

"Maybe you can help us, Red?"

"What do you want?" he asked, still cautious.

"Come out and have a look at the timber on the place. Tell me what it's worth."

"I'll have a look-see. But Jim will have to agree."

"He'll agree all right," Gladys told him quickly. "He knows the place is too much for him."

"Okay. I'll take a look at it."

"When?" she persisted. "Why not today, while you're in town, before you go bush again? And before you get really stuck into all that grog. It's only eleven miles out—though the track's so bad it seems like eleven hundred."

He looked at her sombrely, half inclined to take offence. Women were bossy, he told himself. Couldn't leave a man alone. But her words awakened his business instinct. He'd always wanted to have a look at that range country on Jim's property, but Jim had been cagey, always put him off. It might be worth a packet, especially if there was any veneer stuff amongst it. He glanced at the clock.

"May as well," he agreed, with a show of reluctance. He called the barman to take the bottles, except a flask of brandy which he slipped in his pocket. "My four-wheel-drive's outside. Let's go."

Twisting along the track, they seemed to have little to say. The few desultory remarks Gladys scattered only met with a grunt. Funny the way men altered, she thought, disappointed.

In the old days, no party was complete without Red Morgan. Now he probably sat in a corner and read a book, like Jim, or moped about in the bush, or drank.

Well, she could say without conceit that *she* was still an asset to any party. Unconsciously she tossed her blonded head and preened herself a little.

When they arrived, she jumped down and went inside the cottage, which had already taken on the desolate look of a deserted homestead. Nothing had been touched.

"You know the way better than I do," she told Morgan, climbing back into the jeep.

"I've an idea of the general direction, that's all. I've never been right down. Jim never seemed keen about it."

"He was funny like that. I guess it was because of his horse . . . jumped over, you know."

"Get set for some rough going," Morgan warned her.

They were forced to walk the last few hundred yards to the lip of the ravine. He went forward carefully, but walking lightly in his heavy boots. Breakaway country was dangerous, Jim used to say. Never knew when another bit would break away, and take you with it. He stood a long while, peering downwards.

"Likely-looking timber, Missus," he commented, his eyes narrowing. "But I'd have to have a look-see first. Coming?"

"My name is Gaye . . . or Mrs. Firman," she told him stiffly. She hated this outback term, all the more since she'd not heard it for so long. "Yes, I'll come." How else would she know what was there?

Before she'd gone a quarter of the distance, she regretted her decision. Gripping, slipping, slithering over flat surfaces of rock, hacking, burrowing, and scrambling through dense undergrowth soon exhausted her. Thank heaven, she thought, I'd the sense to wear golf shoes, or I'd never have made it. Now and again, he paused to see if she were following, but made no attempt to assist her. He's mad with me because of Jim, she decided. As if the fever is *my* fault! I don't care. Jim's coming back with me. If Red won't buy the timber, someone else will.

When she'd slid down the last steep incline, she leant breathless against the rock wall, searching for a cigarette. Her package was crumpled and damp. "Want one?"

"Thanks. No. I've the makings."

They sat on a lichen-covered rock, smoking in grateful ease. Gladys was utterly exhausted. For once she forgot her appearance, and only thought with satisfaction: He's not as young as he used to be, either. He's glad of a rest, too. She looked back

the way they'd come, and wondered in dismay how she would ever climb back. "Want a nip of brandy?" Morgan offered suddenly. "I always carry a flask . . . just in case."

"No, thanks. Not yet, anyway. Let's explore the place."

He led the way to the tip of the huge breakaway, jutting into the ravine like the prow of an unimaginable battleship. The woman looked from side to side alertly, her interest mounting as her tiredness receded.

"There's a whole forest down here!" she exclaimed excitedly. "It's worth more than all the rest of the farm. You know," she went on, as he seemed more approachable down here, less than life size, "I'll be able to buy a nice little place of my own at the Gold Coast, instead of just helping my sister. There's a place coming up for sale only two blocks away. You can make a small fortune down there, in the season, if you run a guest house right. Keep the guests amused in the evenings, that's my motto. Latest records, pop songs, bingo, card games . . . the lot. A party a night keeps everybody bright, I say."

Morgan did not answer, and she added hurriedly. "Of course, I'd be able to look after Jim as well. I don't want you to think we parted bad friends. We just agreed to live our own lives and no questions asked. When he's better, he'd be able to help out . . ."

"I remember army days," Morgan commented. "Jim never did take kindly to kitchen fatigues, specially peeling spuds."

"Oh, I didn't mean *that*!" the woman insisted, knowing that she did and that he knew that she did.

The sound of falling water was becoming louder and the going rougher. But at last they reached the knife edge of the prow and she stopped, as if afraid. Morgan plodded on.

He was gone so long that she became uneasy.

"Hi, Red, where are you? What's the matter?"

She hesitated, then went forward cautiously. All at once she saw the Tree. Morgan was staring upwards, his big calloused hands hanging loosely by his sides. He did not speak.

"Heck!" Her trite exclamation fell like a dry leaf into the silent majesty of the ravine. She strove for further speech, but her mind seemed blank. She could only look at the Tree.

Slowly she commenced to move around it, insignificant as an ant against its fantastic bulk. The man followed her, stepping it out, measuring with his trained eyes, calculating. Every now and then he'd stop and stare upwards, making figures in his battered notebook.

When at last they had gone round it, they came to where she'd left her fussy-looking handbag, perched like some strange fungus

on a fallen limb. She went to it, sat down. God, she was tired. This little jaunt had taken more out of her than she'd expected.

She lit another cigarette. "Well?"

The man looked at her shrewdly, and she remembered Jim's once saying that Red Morgan always struck a hard bargain.

"Y'know . . . and I'm only tellin' you because you're Jim's missus . . . I reckon there's enough timber in that tree to build three houses. Must be eighty-thousand super feet of timber. Maybe more. Of course," he added casually, "you only get royalties."

She hardly heard him. Three houses. Three. She stared back at him, fascinated, her lipstick smudged and perspiration rolling unheeded into her make-up.

"By my reckoning, that tree is over two thousand years old. That makes it older'n Christ, doesn't it?"

She watched his lips, like a slow learner, trying to concentrate, to understand.

"Don't you worry," Morgan assured her. "I'll get it out all right. I've not knocked about this country for thirty years for nothing. And the rest of the stand, too." He waved his hand in the opposite direction. "The ravine widens out down the other end. Should have remembered. We'll go back that way."

Against her will, she was conscious of feeling small and insignificant: like the night she'd stayed up, watching the first sputnik hurl across the sky. She'd thought then she'd never really watched the stars before and all the other worlds out there. Half-afraid, she fought against this new feeling. She knew what she wanted, and this Tree and all the others would help her to get it.

Unexpectedly, the excitement and happiness of a few minutes ago was seeping away. What was wrong? The green gloom of this great valley made the sunshine and noise of the Gold Coast seem tawdry and somehow worthless.

She put out a hand to touch the Tree. It felt cold and strange, like water-worn stone. She noticed it was wearing high-water marks like bracelets for some distance up. The trunk was fluted and grooved as it soared away towards a wedge of blue sky, against which its branches formed a vast camouflage. Her head ached, just looking up.

Morgan was still appraising it, his woodman's eyes bright and excited. Yet an expression of wonder lingered on his shrewd, rough-cast face.

"Two thousand years," he repeated, as if to himself. "Two thousand years."

Gladys sat down and wiped her face. She was feeling strange all right.

"I don't go much on that religious stuff, Red," she muttered a little querulously. After all, business was business.

What if it is two thousand years old? So what? She was angered at the tumult of emotions rising in her; like when two oceans meet, she thought, remembering a cape and the water all swirling and struggling, not knowing which way to go. She'd never felt like this before. She didn't want to. Why had she come? She'd always hated the north, except during the war years when all the soldiers were there, Yanks and everyone. She and her sister got along well enough. It was just that, with some money of her own, she'd feel more independent. And that place so near her sister's . . . she'd be a fool to pass up a chance like that. Even if all this timber didn't bring as much as she hoped, it would be something.

She looked down at the dark soft mould under her feet, wondering how deep it was. A phrase from a long-forgotten school book drifted across her mind; the dawn of time. That was it. This stuff had been building up here since the dawn of time. All at once, she was afraid of sinking into it, becoming part of it. Then the fear passed and she felt that would be the natural thing to happen. But not yet. Not yet.

A shiver passed over her. This lonely place. Rain forests were always cold and wet, even though you might be steaming with perspiration and the sun shining. They made you afraid. Sort of threatening. Too quiet; except for the drip, drip, drip . . . which used to drive me crazy. And the little secret scratchings and creakings, and the way the wet leaves whispered, and the noises which weren't really noises at all. She tried urgently to recall the gay brash life she'd been living down south, the sun-bathing, breakfasts on the beach after a hectic night, the ceaseless round of parties.

But she couldn't, any more than she could visualise life on the moon. The aloof mantle of the Tree wrapped her round, intangible, yet all-enveloping. Behind her closed eyes she tried to imagine the Tree felled; its great length prone along the ravine it had dominated so long. Red Morgan was a master of his craft, and would see that it was felled properly, with the least possible damage. But even he could not prevent those branches from being smashed and jagged. And there would be the rawness of the stump, bleeding, mutilated, its secret inner life exposed for the first time for two thousand years. They said every little ring counted a year in the life of a tree.

Christ! She pressed her fingers against her lips. She'd never say that again. Never. She forced herself to think of the three weatherboard houses, set in a row of such houses, kids playing outside, screaming and fighting, women lackadaisically holding garden hoses and gossiping over the side fence; men coming home tired from work; or maybe at the weekends, in singlet and shirt, painting the wood bright garish colours. Two thousand years.

She felt as though an immense hand had grasped her vitals so that she was helpless, incapable of movement or speech. She fought against it. She wondered if Jim knew. Jim. And she was nearer to understanding.

Then her mood hardened. Jim was a fool. Always had been. But not Red Morgan. He had his feet on the ground all right.

"You'll make a packet out of this, Missus," the man was saying. "Eighty thousand super feet of timber . . ."

His voice trailed away and he stood silent, absorbed in his note-book, yet unwittingly part of the wild rugged grandeur around him. She imagined she smelt the freshly sawn timber, could hear the ring of axes, the snarling whirr of the chain saws and the deep-throated growl of the power saws, the clink and rumble of tractors and jinkers as they came to haul the timber away.

The giant hand inside her gripped more tightly, so that she could scarcely breathe or open her eyes. As from a great distance, like a fading echo bouncing from rock to fallen rock along the floor of the great ravine, she heard her own voice saying:

"Red, I . . . guess we'll leave this one."

He stared back at her, angry and amazed.

"Leave it! Why, it's the pick of the whole stand. You'd not find another like this in a thousand miles . . You must be nuts!"

"Check up on the rest, will you, Red? But not this one . . ."

He stamped away angrily, muttering contemptuously about women in business and some people not knowing a good thing when they saw it.

She did not listen, but went slowly back to the Tree. In some strange way, she did not fear it now. She walked slowly around it, and a sensation she did not recognise as exultation possessed her. On the far side, the heel of her shoe became caught in a root, and as she bent down to release it, she caught the dull gleam of metal far down in the green tangle. She picked it. The metal band of one of Jim's old pipes. Holding it tightly, she leant against the Tree, feeling it cool against her forehead.

Jim, she thought. Jim.

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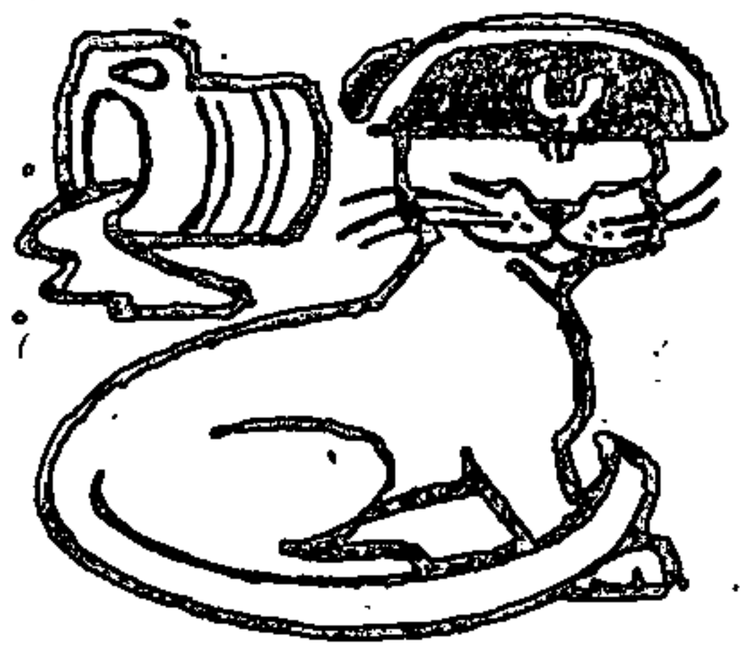
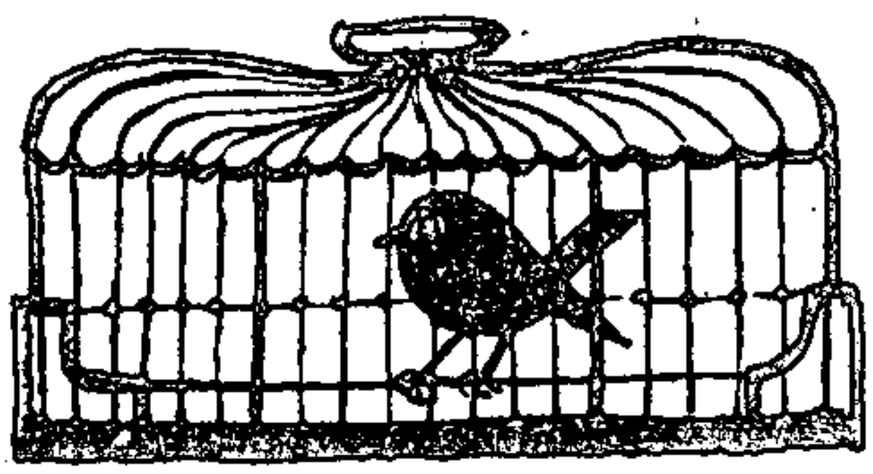
BIRDS AND BEASTS

A test of memory about animals in fact and fiction. Turn to page 153 for the answers

1. She went to church in an English village on a camel.
2. A parrot who cursed in Hindu and then broke into loud laughter.
3. Who was the Empress of Blandings?
4. A donkey had "One far fierce hour and sweet". What poet said this?



5. He found his mare making her will.
6. Known as the Napoleon of Crime, this cat was never there when the deed was done.
7. A novelist wrote about a dog, the pet of a poetess.
8. There is a tradition that oxen kneel in their stalls on Christmas Eve. Who wrote a poem about it?
9. A raven's last words were "Halloa, old girl". To which famous novelist did he belong?
10. This villain kept a family of white mice, kissed them and allowed them to crawl all over him.
11. A bird and a beast were married with a ring from a pig's nose.
12. "And like a thunderbolt he falls." What bird is described as doing this?
13. This animal got fed-up with spring-cleaning and took a holiday.
14. Who had to share his bedroom with a small black pig and a gamecock?
15. "A robin redbreast in a cage." Supply the next line.



He had waited sixteen years for justice: he could wait no longer

NORMAN and the KILLER

by Joyce Carol Oates

BECAUSE he was an ordinary man, whose reflection in mirrors and in incidental windows could have belonged to anyone, Norman had never thought of himself as involved in anything that could attract attention. He had no interest in going to see accidents or fires or other disasters because he would be pushed around by the crowd and would not complain, and because he had no heart to peer in, there, at the very centre of the jostling, to see the exposed bleeding flesh suddenly catapulted out of the usual channels of life.

Because he was a gentle man, a shy man, no longer exactly young, whose life had attached itself gently to his family, he was surprised at the professional hardness with which he was able to meet customers in the clothing store he managed, and at the violence of the love he was suffering for a woman his brother-in-law had introduced him to. In his youth he had read much and was able to appreciate the spiritual hardness of the heroes of great fiction, who seemed to him to walk upon ropes stretched over nothing, dazzling and performing endlessly, without fear of death. Norman envied them, but could not believe in them; they told him nothing about himself.

The young woman's name was Ellen. She too, had read much in her youth, which her dark opaque eyes suggested had been an extension of the life she now led, sternly bleak and self-satisfied, a loneliness that had to be respected because it had been her own choice. She had been married for several years, in her early twenties, but of this Norman did not allow himself to think. He

often frightened himself at the anxiety he felt for her; his desperation to protect her from whatever startled her eyes, whatever drew her mind away from him as if he were no more than an accidental accomplice to the caprices of her memory. Yet he knew he had no right to that desperation, for she did not belong to him.

At times he even disliked her for her power over him, but most of the time, during the long identical days at the store, his love for this woman—whom he did not really know—was so absurdly great as to overwhelm him, threaten him with an obscure, inexplicable violence; something that might have been building up in him through the years while he had lived at home, a child grown into a man without anyone really noticing. Waking each morning in his old room, in the old house, he would smell resentfully the odours of breakfast being cooked downstairs and would think that, if he did not marry Ellen, he would wake to this every morning for the rest of his life.

One afternoon they drove out of the city to a summer theatre. The drive took two hours, and Norman was pleased at Ellen's friendliness. She spoke of the theatre, some actors she knew, and this made him think idly that she was to him like the women he had been seeing in movies all his life: ethereal and majestic, following a script he did not know; could not anticipate, yet smiling out of the very graciousness of their own near-beauty, welcoming his admiration while not exactly acknowledging it. She wore white; the self-conscious pose of her profile distracted him from the road.

She was telling him now about her job. Norman thought of marrying her, of living with her, but at this his face flinched, for it seemed impossible that this should ever be; his very reflection, glancing down at him out of the rear-view mirror, the dusty reflection of a rather heavy, polite, stern face, with wisps of damp dark hair curled down on his forehead, caught his eye as if he were sharing a secret with it, a secret of perplexed failure.

"I may have to leave this job, after six years," she said. He glanced over at her. "There are complications," she said.

He turned into a garage for petrol. He did not want to ask her about these complications, but he knew she was anxious to continue. In the bright glare from the sun she looked younger than she was; her youth had always seemed to Norman like a weapon. They waited for the man to put in the petrol.

"Always complications, involvements," she said. "Personal relationships start off so cleanly but then become too involved. Even business relationships . . ." She smirked at something, some

memory; for a moment her face was unfamiliar, her nose sharp, her eyes darker with the intensity of a bemused thought.

Norman, unhappy, turned to pay the attendant. He peered up at a man his own age, of moderate height, dressed in greasy clothes; the man's face was smeared with dirt and perspiration.

"Hot day," said the man, with a smirk something like Ellen's.

Norman, staring at him, felt his heart begin to pound absurdly. The man's face was familiar, unmistakable. For an instant they stared at each other. The man licked his lips, a stout strong man yet a little startled by Norman's look, and turned away. Norman stared at his back. He wanted to open the car door and get out, do something.

Beside him Ellen was talking, but he could not understand her. Finally she touched his arm. "Is something wrong?" she said.

"I think I know that man," he said. As soon as he said this something seemed to assure him: he did not know the man, it was impossible, it did not matter. Nothing mattered.

"Know him from where?" Ellen said.

"I don't know, nothing. It doesn't matter," he said.

The man returned with Norman's change. Norman tried not to look at him, for the intensity of his feeling had alarmed him: he thought of his uncle, who had been put away in a Home at last by his patient wife, an ordinary man who could not stop talking. In that instant, as he first looked at the attendant's face, Norman felt a kinship with that other, lost man, whom he had not thought of for ten years . . . But he did look at the man's face after all. He was smiling without enthusiasm, a smile that stretched his lips to show discoloured teeth, leaving the rest of his face indifferent. He had a rather plump face, and had obviously gained weight, but out of that heavy dirt-streaked face, another face confronted him, unmistakable. It was the face of a *boy, maybe seventeen.*

"Here y'are, thank you," the man said. He had a dirty rag over one shoulder. It was strange, Norman thought, fumbling for the ignition, that the man had not offered to clean his windscreen.

He drove away. His heart was pounding furiously.

"Why didn't you ask him if he knew you?" Ellen said. "It seems to mean a lot to you." She sounded resentful, but he knew that if he were to continue she would lose interest.

"No, it was a mistake," Norman said. Yet his mind flashed and dazzled him: he knew the face, of course; he might have been shuffling through a pack of cards to come to it, through a handful of old snapshots, waiting patiently for it to turn up.

"You're driving rather fast," Ellen said.

He slowed down, glanced at his watch, and was surprised to see that it was so early. A great block of time seemed to have passed, jerked away from him. Back at the garage, was the man staring after this car, his smile abandoned? Norman looked fiercely at the countryside. He shut his mind, pushed everything away. He would not think, he would not remember.

They had dinner at a country inn near the theatre. It was dim and pretentious, but he saw that Ellen enjoyed it. In her white silk dress and dark necklace she looked clean, harshly clean and young, her shoulders poised against an unfamiliar background of rough-hewn wooden walls decorated with old wrought-iron objects Norman could not have identified. Yet Norman heard himself say, "Did you say you had a brother?" Yes, she had said. Why did he ask that? Why at this moment? She had a brother who lived in Europe, what did it matter? She was always antagonistic about families, friends, any relationships that belonged to the past.

Norman wanted to touch her hand, not to comfort her but to ask for help. The darkness of his mind was released, flowing steadily, unhurriedly, and out of that flood of old faces his heartbeat anticipated the anguish of his revelation. "Excuse me," he said, standing. He caught her glance: she was thinking that he behaved strangely, he could not be trusted. He went to the men's room.

There, his back against the tiled wall, he rubbed his eyes and waited until the turmoil ceased. He remembered the face now. He knew he had remembered it at once. Now it came to him clearly as it used to be, a boy's face, dirty and hard, and rearing behind it a grey March morning, an indifferent mottled sky.

"My God," Norman said aloud. He wanted to rush back to Ellen as if he had something joyous to tell her. But his legs were weak; he reached out to get his balance. Or he would go to a telephone. He would telephone the police. And his father—but his father was dead, had been dead for years. He felt strangely peaceful; something might have been decided. When he returned to their table, where this attractive young woman awaited him, concerned for him, he felt his fingers twitch as if he wanted to reach out to embrace her, to have her draw him to her so that he would no longer need to think.

One Saturday afternoon when he was fifteen Norman and his brother Jack were coming home from a movie. It was about four-thirty: late winter, the day already ending, a chill bleak wind. The Technicolor of the movie had dazzled Norman's eyes,

so that the warehouses they passed now seemed to him unsubstantial and deceptive, not remnants of a world but anticipations of a fuller, greater world he would grow into. Invisible behind the vision of that movie had been flights of music, but here there was no music, only their hurrying footsteps.

Jack, at seventeen, was not much taller than Norman; both were small for their ages, with meek, dark defensive faces. There were other boys Norman preferred to be with—even his younger brother—but Jack never made friends easily, shrugged away the long days spent at the high school with a disdainful closed expression, so that only after his death did Norman find out, from other people, that Jack was considered a little strange—not slow, exactly, because he had always been good at mathematics, but not quite quick enough, not right enough, somehow inferior.

They went down by the river, Jack's idea, and here the wind was stronger. An odour of something rotting was in the air. Norman and his brother wore jackets that were alike, the same size, made of material like canvas, a dull faded green. Sitting at the end of one of the old docks was a middle-aged man in the same kind of jacket.

"What's he doing out there? He don't have a fishing rod," Jack said resentfully. They walked past the dock. Norman shared Jack's resentment, because it seemed to him something was wrong, something adult was out of place, and if this was so, then everything might be out of place. The familiar waterfront had become, in the poor light, parched with heavy clouds that gave to everything a strange lightless glare that hurt Norman's eyes.

Jack, as if to comfort him, talked of what they would have for supper that night—he had smelled the spaghetti sauce cooking before they left. But Norman was watching something ahead—movement back by the unloading platform of one of the old warehouses, a giant monstrosity that had been abandoned for years.

An immense exhaustion overwhelmed him suddenly, for this world was so banal a betrayal of the world of that movie, so unimaginative a failure, that he could not respond to it. A few more years, he thought, and his life would change: he did not yet know just how it would change. He would not be like Jack, begging to quit school, his side of the room cluttered with car-racing magazines. And he thought, glancing at Jack's worried face, that he could not admire him as an older brother, for Jack was not big or strong enough. He did not like Jack because Jack did not bully him; he pitied Jack because Jack at seventeen had

to wear the same jacket he wore at fifteen, and the two of them, bored with each other, were doomed to be brothers for ever and could do nothing about it.

"There's some guys," Jack said. Norman saw three boys on the dock ahead. Something was tilting, falling over. It was a hollow metal cylinder that was buoyed up for a moment on the water, then sank.

"Do you know them?" Norman said. "Are they in your class?"

"No," Jack said.

As a child, Norman had always taken his responses from other people, and now, at fifteen, he felt Jack's sudden stiffened look pass over to him at once.

They kept on walking, Jack a little ahead. The three boys were laughing at something, their snatches of words incomprehensible and harsh, as if they spoke a foreign language. One, in a soiled flannel shirt, was lighting a cigarette. They were about Jack's age. As Jack and Norman approached they grew quiet, staring out at the water. Jack was looking straight ahead, but Norman could not help but glance at the boys—absolutely ordinary faces with identical blank, cautious expressions, their hair much too long. They stood with their legs apart, as if posing. The boy in the flannel shirt lit his cigarette and tossed the match out into the water. Jack and Norman passed by, were by them, and Norman felt his legs want to run—he did not know why—but Jack did not hurry. Norman's breathing had quickened. Nothing had happened, no-one had said a word, yet just before he was hit something in him shouted at the back of Jack's head: You fool! You fool for getting us into this!

A board struck Norman on the right shoulder and he spun around, gaping. He saw the three faces lunge at him, serious and quiet. Then the pain exploded again, this time on his chest, and he felt himself falling, falling back into nothing; then he struck the water hard. It swelled upon him and he sank into its frigid softness with his eyes opened in terror at the sky. His arms jerked, his legs threshed, but caught at nothing. It seemed queer to him that the water was so cold and hard, yet could not support him . . . Then he came to the surface, choking. Someone yelled, "Get that one!" and Norman tried to fling himself backward, anywhere. He did not know yet that Jack was in the water too. Something struck the water beside his head, he did not know what, and disappeared at once.

Through the film before his eyes he saw one of the boys striking at the water by the dock with a long piece of rusty metal, his

face hard and deliberate, as if he were chopping wood and counting the strokes. Norman pressed backward, out and backward, his heart pounding so violently that he could not see. Someone shouted—a word Norman did not recognise—and it seemed that in the freezing water words were shattered and had no meaning, did not matter, nothing mattered.

When he woke, it was with reluctance. Immediately the air assaulted him. He lay on his back against something hard, faces were peering down at him. Adults. He had been brought back. In curious alarm they stared at him and he at them; then he began to vomit. Someone held him. His body convulsed as if struggling against an invisible enemy, writhing and fleeing. They spoke to him, there was a siren somewhere, even a woman's voice, and though he could now understand their words he felt himself an intruder, someone returned from the dead who has no business overhearing anything. It was said later that he called for Jack at once, but he never remembered this. They had answered by assuring him that Jack was all right, he was already in the ambulance, but of course this was a lie.

During the play he could not sit still. He perspired heavily. On-stage, the actors moved through their lines without hesitation, pert and skilful, but Norman understood nothing. He might have been drowning again, drowning in air and words of another language, remote even from the woman who sat beside him. At the interval they went outside and he could tell from her silence that she was not pleased. They stared out together at a flower garden, some design of grass and flowers murky in the twilight but heavy with meaning, deliberate and plotted.

"Would you like to go home?" Ellen said softly.

As if guilty, Norman could not meet her eyes. He heard her words but could not make sense of them, for he was staring once again through that cold film at the boys up on the dock—secure and dry—the faces of two of them raw and blurred, but the other face now clear. He recognised it.

"Why don't we go home?" Ellen said, touching his arm. Norman knew that if he broke down before her he would lose her.

"No, I'm all right," he said, almost angrily. "It's nothing."

He stayed at her apartment for only a few minutes. She was tired and distracted and apologetic, and seemed not to see how he wanted to remain with her. He would have talked of anything, done anything, if only she would protect him against the violence of the past.

After he left her he went to a bar for a while and then, dizzy

and sickened, he went home. In bed old fragments of prayers taunted his mind, and now and then it seemed to him quite clear that he had made a mistake, that he was perhaps losing his mind. He would do nothing. He would not give in. In the morning he would wake as usual to the pleasant smells from the kitchen below, he would go to the store and phone Ellen, he would never drive out to that part of the country again.

But he was unable to phone her. He started to dial her number several times, but always something came up and he was relieved to put back the receiver. Once he caught himself walking somewhere very deliberately—to his desk in the back office. He opened one of the drawers and glanced in at the pistol there, half covered with papers. Trembling, he hid it with papers. He stood there, staring down at the drawer for a while.

After the store closed he drove out to the country. The drive took less time than it had the other day. While he drove he thought of nothing, not even Ellen.

If he returned to the garage and saw the man again, and if he could assure himself that it was not the same man he wanted, then perhaps he would phone Ellen from the garage. But as he neared the small junction where the garage was supposed to be, he found himself looking shrewdly around, at houses, down lanes, down side roads. He passed the garage. No-one was outside. A shabby garage with dented Coke signs and signs with scrawled numbers on them advertising petrol prices, and other signs advertising cigarettes and spark plugs. The drive was just dirt and gravel, not paved. They did little business, he thought, and this was good. Several miles farther he turned down a side road and drove slowly along: country without houses, wild fields unowned by people, woods gone wild. When he saw a shanty by the edge of a woods, half a mile back from the road, he stopped the car and got out.

The shanty was deserted. It was roofed with tar paper and its wood had turned black. Inside there were newspapers on the ground, an old dented pan, some rags, a few tiny ant hills. Weeds blossomed everywhere. Norman tried to imagine what use the shanty had had, who might have built it. It seemed to him a mystery: built, abandoned, now ready for him and his brother's killer.

When he drove back he stopped at the garage for petrol. The man who served him was not the killer, but Norman saw that there was another man inside, drinking soda pop.

"What time do you people close?" Norman said.

"Stay open till ten, summer," the man said.

Norman hardly glanced at him. His eyes kept moving back to the open door of the garage. "That's all, thanks," he said, smiling. It was the first time he had smiled since having first seen that man.

He phoned Ellen from his home. At once his voice became anxious and apologetic, and her silence tormented him. "I know, I know what you said that time about not wanting to get involved with people you can't trust," he said hopelessly, "and how you don't want—you don't—" He fell silent. The vision of her that her silence evoked in him was transparent and unfamiliar. Was she going to say nothing? How long had they known each other?

"I am going to see you again, aren't I?" Norman said.

"Yes, of course," she said faintly. "But I think you should get some rest or see a doctor. You don't seem yourself . . ."

"No, there's nothing wrong with me," Norman said sharply. She did not reply. Norman said, "When can I see you? Tomorrow? No, not tomorrow, I forgot—I have something—"

"What are you doing?" she said.

"I'm sorry, I just can't make it then. The day after tomorrow?" Norman said. "Can I call you?"

"Of course you can call me," she said meekly and coldly. Norman felt in that instant her strange hatred for him, for the force that drew him from her and before which he was so helpless; his eyes smarted with tears. "I'll call you, then," he said. He had the idea as he hung up that perhaps he would never see her again, and yet he could do nothing about it.

The next evening he drove out to the country again. Signs, barns, houses, side roads had become familiar. On the floor of the back seat were a small bag of groceries and two blankets and an old oil lamp he had found in the attic.

It was nearly ten o'clock when he approached the garage. His heart was thudding dangerously, yet it did not upset him. He knew his body would not fail him, he could drive it as he drove the car. It was when he did not make himself think of the killer, when he tried to think of other things, that he felt the overwhelming guilt that had become for him the most extraordinary emotion he had ever known.

Now, prepared, everything ready and planned, he felt no guilt at all.

With his car headlights off, he parked down the road from the garage, watching. Bushes screened him partly. There was his man—dragging a carton of empty soda pop bottles inside the garage. Norman waited. He had never before felt quite so free:

the immensity of freedom to act and to act entirely without consequence. He wondered if that man and the two boys with him had experienced this same sweet suffocating freedom that afternoon sixteen years ago.

The lights went out in the garage, the doors were closed. Norman had no trouble making out the killer, who was taller than the other man, and walked with heavy plodding steps as if he were overcome by the heat or by exhaustion. The men went to their cars, the car doors slammed shut almost simultaneously, the other man drove off. The killer paused to light a cigarette. He tossed the match on to the gravel and Norman's lips jerked into a grin of recognition.

He stepped on the accelerator and was able to head off the man's car just as it was about to turn into the road. Norman leaned across the seat and waved into the glaring headlights.

The man yelled, "What do you want? We're closed."

But Norman had already got out of the car. "Something's wrong with my car, it's an emergency," he said. The man swore. His car engine roared and the car rocked impatiently back on the gravel as the man twisted the steering wheel.

"You, wait," Norman said. "Not so fast." He took the gun out of his pocket and approached the man's open window. Behind the headlights he was helpless now, his face sagging at the sight of the gun as if he had expected it. Norman's heart thudded viciously and he heard his own words as if from a distance.

"I want to talk to you. I don't want to hurt you. You just get in this other car." The man did not move. Norman could hear him swallow.

"There isn't any money in there," the killer said hoarsely. "Just some dollar bills. We made—we made a lousy four dollars today—"

"I don't want money," Norman said. "Get in my car."

The man moved jerkily, then paused. Everything was still except for the noises of the insects.

"You don't want any money?" the man said after a moment.

Norman sat beside him and the man drove. They went along slowly, down the dirt road, jerking and bouncing in the ruts.

"They're waiting for me at home," the man said cautiously. "My wife and kids."

But Norman said nothing in response. When they reached the shanty—he had left a rag near the ditch for a marker—he told the man to turn off the road and drive down an old cow lane and into the woods. The car churned and became entangled in underbrush.

GAS
AGE
SUPER

"Look, I don't know what you want," the man said, crouched over the steering wheel, "but I—"

"I'm not going to hurt you," Norman said. He was a little embarrassed at the man's fear: he had supposed the man would be the same as he had been sixteen years ago, cold and deliberate, without emotion. "I just want to talk with you," he said. "I want to get the truth from you. Where were you about sixteen years ago?"

He watched the man's damp face. It was an ugly, confused face, and yet its younger image had not been ugly, exactly. "I don't—I don't know," the man muttered.

"Try to remember," Norman said. "What's your name?"

"Cameron," he said at once. "Anyone around here would know me. Look, what do you want? I don't know you. With that gun there—"

"I'm not going to hurt you," Norman said softly. "Just tell me where you were sixteen years ago."

"We come up from Kentucky, first me then my mother and father," the man said. Again he swallowed clumsily. "I was maybe twenty then. I don't know. Look, I think you want some other man, I mean, it looks to me you got some other man in mind—"

"You never came up from Kentucky," Norman said. "Or if you did you were younger than that."

"I don't know how old I was," the man said, "maybe I was younger—" His face rippled nervously.

"You remember me, don't you?" Norman said. "You knew me the other day, too, didn't you?"

"What other day?" the man said. In his heavy face this new, nervous rigidity contrasted ludicrously with the lazy slabs of flesh close about his jaws. He looked as if he were trying to shake himself free of the weight of his flesh.

"I only want to talk to you, then the police will take care of it," Norman said.

"Take care of what?" the man said at once.

"You know what," Norman said. The man stared across at him. He supposes I am crazy, Norman thought. "So you don't admit it? That you remember me?" he said. "I'm not going to force anything out of you, I give you my word on that. We're going to have a long talk, nothing hurried. Because I've been waiting sixteen years—"

"What's this sixteen years?" the man said. His voice was trembling and raw, a voice Norman had not yet heard from him. There was a certain edginess there too, a recklessness that made

Norman draw back so that he could watch the man more carefully. Nothing was going to go wrong. He had control. While insects swirled about the headlights and tapped against the windscreen Norman felt strength course through him as if it were a sign, a gift, something supernatural.

"Sixteen years ago you killed my brother," he said. "Sixteen years ago last March."

"Killed your brother!" said the man. He made a whistling noise. "Look, mister, I never killed nobody. You got the wrong guy here, believe me. I never killed nobody. Who was your brother? Am I supposed to know you? Were you in the Army with me or something?"

Norman let him talk. The man's words tumbled from him as if stunned with shock; they meant nothing. Finally he stopped. The insects flicked themselves lightly against the car windows and disappeared.

"Turn off the lights," Norman said. He had his torch ready. "All right, now get out."

"What are you going to do?" said the man. "Are you going to —going to—you said something about the police; why don't you call them or something? I mean, they got these things on record, could look it up and see when it was. I never killed nobody, not even in the Army when we was overseas, and not even by accident or anything. Was your brother in the Army?"

"Get out of the car," said Norman.

"Then where are we going?" the man said, gripping the steering wheel. "What are you going to do to me?"

"I want to talk to you," Norman said.

"You're crazy!" the man whispered.

They went into the shanty, Norman behind the man. Norman put the things down and shone the torch around from corner to corner.

"What place is this?" the man asked him. "What are you going to do?" His teeth had begun to chatter; Norman was astonished.

"Please sit down," he said. Cobwebs hung dustily from the ceiling. In the glare of the torch the weeds were stark and vivid, casting brittle shadows that froze in a complex, teethlike structure against the bottoms of the walls. The man sat, slowly, groping about. He looked gross and foolish sitting in the weeds, his fat stomach straining against his belt. About his forehead dark strands of hair were plastered as if arranged by hand.

Norman crouched against the opposite wall. "I want the truth from you," he whispered. "The truth." The man's lips began to move, but he said nothing. "Try to remember," Norman said.

"You killed a boy and he's dead, his life was ended in a few minutes, and now you're here with me and alive. You've got to see the difference between the two—he'd be just bones now, everything rotted away if you dug him up, and you're sitting here alive. He was seventeen when you killed him." The man brushed weeds away from him as if they were insects, in terror; then he stopped abruptly. "I think you do remember me," Norman said. "I was with him that day. You and the other two boys—"

"Other two?"

"Other two boys. All three of you. You pushed us in the river and wouldn't let us out. You hit Jack with something—when they found him his face was all slashed. I saw it myself. It was you and two other boys. I know your face."

The man began to shake his head. "My wife is waiting for me," he said faintly, "I can't talk too long. . ."

"Where are the other two? Did they leave the city?"

"Mister, I got to go home. They're—"

"Shut up about that!" Norman cried. He waited until his anger died down. "I just want the truth. A boy is dead and you killed him and you're going to tell the truth before you leave here!"

"Mister, I never killed nobody—"

"But I saw you. I saw *you*. I saw your face."

"It wasn't me, it was somebody else."

"It was you."

"I got all kinds of cousins and guys that look like me—"

"Living up here?"

"Sure, around here, in the city too—"

"You said you were from Kentucky."

The man paused. His teeth chattered and he stared at Norman as if a flash of pain had overcome him. Then he said, "I am. They come up, too."

"You all came up? When was this?"

"A while ago, I don't know—"

"You're lying," Norman said.

"I'm not lying!"

The man's lips twisted up into a terrified angry grimace. Norman felt his own lips twitch as if in imitation. "I want justice, nothing but justice," Norman whispered. He was shining the torch on the man's heaving chest so that the fainter halo of light illuminated his face, startling shadows upward from his nose and lips and the deep sockets of his eyes. "I've given up things to get here tonight," Norman said. "I'm going to get an answer from you, going to get justice. We must have justice."

He might have marvelled at what he said, at his strange talent, for where in the long tedious days at the store and in the evenings at home had he learned such things? Yet he felt the truth of what he was saying. He had been sent here, he could not turn away from it now if he wanted to. For this man he had given up Ellen, he would never break free and into her world now; he had given her up, killed her in himself.

"There are things that have to be finished off. If I turned you over to the police without a confession it wouldn't do any good. Nobody would care. Nobody knows about it any more except me and my family and you. Are you going to tell me the truth?"

The man sat staring down at his thick legs, motionless.

"You and two other kids, one Saturday afternoon," Norman said softly. "On the docks. You knocked us both in the water and wouldn't let us out. You hit Jack, cut up his face. His eye was cut. My brother drowned but I didn't. A man sitting down nearby came over and got me. You read about it in the papers probably. You and them. You kept on reading it till it was forgotten. Nobody cared. And even me, I suppose I forgot it too . . . Now are you going to tell me the truth?"

After several hours the man was sitting in the same position. Norman had lit the oil lamp and was sitting with his back against the wall, watching the man cautiously. When he asked the man about telling the truth, sometimes he answered and sometimes he did not. When he said nothing Norman had to fight down an impulse to strike him. He had to control his anger.

"You son of a bitch," the man whispered. "Going to shoot me anyway, why not now?"

"I just want the truth," Norman said. "I want it written down and signed. Your confession."

"Then you're going to shoot me, aren't you?"

"No. I told you."

"Should I write it on paper or what? Do you have some?"

"Then you did do it?"

The man squinted. "Didn't you say you saw me?"

"Yes, I saw you."

"Then I must've done it."

"Do you admit it?" Norman said, leaning forward. The bovine stupidity of that face—which he felt he had been staring at for years, hating—was suddenly too much for him. He slashed the back of the gun against the man's knee, for no reason, without really knowing what he had done. The blow did not hurt, the man seemed only baffled by it. Norman's face burned. "You

made me do that," he said accusingly. "I didn't mean to—I didn't plan—you made me do it."

"Going to shoot me, why not now?" the man said dully.

"Nobody's going to shoot you," Norman said. "Will you just tell the truth for once? Will you stop lying?"

"My wife—"

"To hell with that!"

"My wife can tell you. Lots of people could, but you don't care. You want to kill me."

The man hid his face in his hands. Norman could still see part of his anguished teeth. "No," Norman said. "I only want justice." But the word "justice" struck him suddenly as a puzzle: what was he talking about? It evoked in his mind an uncertain image of a courthouse with a flag flying over it, not a picture of any court in town but one out of a movie or a book. The image vanished. Norman sat up. His head had begun to pound, he had not eaten that day, he cared about nothing except this man. "I don't need sleep," he said without pride. "I can keep going until I get the truth from you. I've waited sixteen years now."

"Sixteen years," the man whispered. His hands came away from his face and in that instant Norman saw unmistakably a flash of something like recognition. A droplet of perspiration tumbled down the man's face, from his forehead to his chin and then to his wet shirt front, as if stunned by this recognition.

"Are you going to admit it?" Norman said.

"I'm not admitting anything!"

Norman's hand, holding the gun, jerked as if it had come alive. "What the hell do you mean?" he said. "A minute ago—"

"I'm not admitting anything!"

Norman waited until his heartbeat slowed. He felt on the precipice of terrible danger. Then he drew his knees up and watched the man silently.

"My brother and I were very close," he said softly. "He often did things for me, stuck up for me. He looked like me only he was a lot bigger . . . he was going to go to college. Then one day you killed him. Just like that. For no reason." Norman wondered if the man was listening. "Why did you do it? For no reason, nothing, not even for money, just nothing . . . Something in a murderer's brain must pinch him and make him do it, and everything is ruined. Lives are ruined. Nothing can be right and balanced again until justice is won—the injured party has to have justice. Do you understand that? Nothing can be right, for years, for lifetimes, until that first crime is punished. Or else we'd all be animals. The crime keeps on and on unless it's

punished. Somebody like me gets caught in the middle and can't have his own life. Here I have to ruin myself to make it right and never had any choice—"

The man's eyes were fascinated by Norman's face; he could not look away. When it began to get light Norman turned off the lamp. The man, slouched across from him in the weeds, looked rumpled and sick and aged. He really was not Norman's age after all, but quite a bit older. "Here," said Norman. He took an orange out of the grocery bag and tossed it at the man. It struck his knee and fell to the ground. The man seemed not to notice. "Eat that. You need to eat," Norman said. The man pushed the orange away vaguely, yet still without seeming to notice it.

The man jerked his head up as if someone had called him.

"Eat that orange," Norman said. "That's good for you." The man shook his head slowly. "I said eat it," said Norman. Muscles tensed in his jaw. He waited.

He watched the man peel the orange. Juice trickled down his big hands and fell on to his trousers and on the bent weeds.

"Now eat it," said Norman.

When the man finished, Norman said, "Are you ready now to confess?" The man made a sound something like a sob. He wiped his mouth; he stared down at nothing. Norman's heart beat so violently that his arms had begun to tremble. For an instant he felt faint; black spots appeared before his eyes, like insects. But he forced himself to say, evenly, "Are you ready to confess?"

"I never did it," the man whispered.

"But you did. You did something. You killed somebody."

"Look, I never—"

"Stop lying!" Norman cried. "Do you want to make me hurt you? Is that it? Want to bring me down to your level, a damn filthy animal? I waited sixteen years to get the truth from you."

"What do you want me to do?" the man said. He lifted his sticky palms in a gesture of helplessness. "Where's the paper? What should I write? You said you'd let me go then—"

"I said what?"

"Said the police would have a record of it—"

"I never said that," Norman whispered.

"Yes, you said it, I heard you. We would go from here to the police and they would have some record. Have it written down. In a file. That's how they do it."

"Look, I don't want to do this to you," Norman said. "I don't want to be here. I have my own life, my own life, and here I am, over thirty already, and haven't done anything, and you sit and

whine about yourself! You! You gave yourself up to me the day you killed him and there's nothing you can do about it."

"I got proof I wasn't up here—nowhere near here—"

"Like hell."

"We can go out and—"

"Don't you move," Norman said. His eyes throbbed. His vision itself seemed to throb with outrage and dismay. Only now had he begun to realise that this man had tried to kill him too.

"If—if you got some paper or something—"

"You'd write it wrong," Norman said.

"No, I'll write it, then you check it, then I'll sign it—"

Norman laughed tonelessly. "You must think I'm crazy."

"What?"

"Who'd believe what you wrote when you had a gun pointed at you! How can I prove you did it, how can I prove anything? You have me trapped now like you did *then*—I could be drowning out in the water, it's the same thing, I feel like I'm drowning here, there's nothing I can do to get you—to get justice—"

His voice had become feverish. His hatred now was impersonal and ubiquitous: he hated without any object, without any catalyst. Even his brother's memory had become an annoyance.

"But what are you going to do?" the man said, licking his lips. "I think they'd believe a note," he said softly.

"They wouldn't. Not a jury."

"If I confessed it out loud to them—"

"No."

"If I said how I remembered it, who was with me, what you two looked like—"

"No, not even then."

"If I—if I got in touch with one of those two guys, and he said—"

"You're lying."

Stunned, baffled, the man stared at him. It seemed to Norman obvious that he was lying now, that he really could not remember anything but was only pretending, as if to make Norman feel better.

"All right. You can go," Norman said.

The man did not move. "What?"

"You can go. Go."

"You mean leave here?"

His legs moved, experimentally, but he did not get up. He was squinting at Norman. "You want me to go home?"

"Go home to your wife."

"Yes, all right," the man said. He got up slowly. His legs must

have ached. Each of his movements was queer and gentle, as if he were still in a dream and feared overturning something fragile. "Yes," he whispered. The man tried not to look at Norman. He moved slowly, even his eyes moved slowly to the door, and it was finally his gesture of absurd fastidiousness—he paused to brush dirt and orange peels off his trousers—that overwhelmed Norman.

"You bastard, you killer!" Norman cried. "Going to walk out like that! It's in the newspapers every day how they kill people and walk out. Nothing ever happens, nobody gets punished, nothing gets put right, and people like myself have to live under the shadow of it! Killers! What the hell do I care if you did it or not? If it wasn't you it was somebody else—Or even if nobody did it, if it was an accident or if I never even had a brother named Jack or anything—"

"Named Jack?" said the man.

Norman pulled the trigger. The shot was much louder than he had expected. When he opened his eyes the shanty was empty. He crawled to the doorway and looked out—there the man was, running, through the mist. He aimed the gun again and fired. The man stumbled, fell against a tree with his arms out in an embrace. Still on his knees, Norman fired again.

"Everything I did for him," he sobbed, "everything ruined—He wouldn't give a damn anyway, that's how it always is. What do they care? I bring her home money every week, she forgets to say thanks, why should she say thanks? There's always more where that came from. Dirty bastards, killers, a whole world of killers, and that one there sitting all night long telling lies in front of me—as if I didn't know him right away!"

Something in him seemed to collapse. The earth beneath him tilted suddenly, and he felt spiky grass against his face; everything was dizzy, confused. His fingers grasped at the earth as if he believed his weight was not enough to hold him down and keep him from being sucked up into the depths of the morning sky.

Minutes passed, Norman waited to regain his strength. "You there," he said bitterly. "Hey,you." The man did not answer. He must have been lying where he fell. Norman made a face, thinking of the day ahead, the airless routine: months, years of ordinary life, so sane and so remote from this field. He closed his eyes and felt his strength course slowly back into his body. Yet still he felt the numbed, beatific emptiness of one who no longer doubts that he possesses the truth, and for whom life will have for ever lost its joy.

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CORPORAL BRUNOWSKI *in the Spring*

by **HARRY SUTTON**

A merry mix-up of match-making involving two love-lorn airmen and one erratic widow

WHEN Corporal Brunowski fell for the widow, Maria Bertorelli, it was a matter of concern for everybody on the station. The CO and the most delinquent erk were equally dismayed; it was as urgently discussed in the officers' and sergeants' messes as in the corporals' club, where, at night, the desolate Brunowski could be seen, nursing his ravaged soul; too morose even to drink with his friends.

Nobody was without sympathy for the circumstances of his entanglement. None were without interest in the outcome.

News of the disaster, for it cannot be called a romance, burst upon the station on a day in early spring. It was a time when Corporal Brunowski, briefly released from his winter labours of coal deliveries round the camp, could normally be seen, number one uniform new-pressed and uncomfortable, preparing for his fourteen days' London leave. It was a yearly ritual, lovingly performed by

Brunowski and followed with interest by all the station. For Corporal "Bruno", in charge of his coal party, was as much a landmark as the Battle of Britain Spitfire which sat, so proudly out of date, at the camp entrance. And the corporal's affairs were on the same level of public respect for glories long passed but not quite forgotten.

The fact was that Corporal Ivor Brunowski wore on his breast, below the single-winged air-gunner's badge, the bright blue ribbon of the *Virtute Militari*, Polish equivalent of our Victoria Cross. And although no-one spoke of it from one year's end to another, the station was very conscious of his high honour. They knew that, for all his quiet manner, this hugely-built, ageing Pole had achieved the ultimate in bravery whilst many of them were still at school, or not even born. And without regard to rank or position, they respected him for it.

Seeing him riding the coal lorry, record sheets in his hand, pencil-stub behind his ear, many commanding officers had tried to make him up to sergeant. One had even put him forward for a commission, hoping that the Selection Board would consider his poor English and meagre education more than offset by his war record.

But with all of this, Brunowski himself was quite unconcerned. His wife and six children were happily established in a friendly street in sight of the brick cliffs of Battersea power station; his job in the coal compound left weekends free when, if luck was with him, he could hitch-hike down the A1 for a few hours at home; and, above all, the daily round of coal deliveries made friends for him all over the camp; and friendship was very important to Bruno.

Perhaps it was this more than anything else—the inescapable loneliness of the expatriate living outside a language he could not master—which made him the victim of Maria Bertorelli.

And victim he was; nothing less would describe his condition.

"She break my heart, that lovely woman," he told a sergeant who made a friendly joke with him about his accustomed spring leave in London. "I no take leave. Not this time. My wife would see right into here." He tapped his massive head. "She would know."

"But, Bruno," said the sergeant, "Maria Bertorelli is nothing to you. Why, you've never even taken her out. You only talk to her!"

"You say right," Brunowski solemnly nodded his agreement. "I only talk. But she burn—how you say—in my guts. I so love that woman."

And that was all anybody could get from him. Yet as the days passed and spring unfolded to full summer, Corporal Brunowski still did not go home to Battersea. A gloom was cast over the station as he made his rounds, quietly now; no longer calling his usual, expected joke: "Dirty coal, here you are, all fresh," as he stopped at Tech. Wing, the central boiler house, or the airmen's mess. His depression spread through the coal party itself and even Butch, the camp mongrel, no longer barked excitedly as he rode with them on the swaying lorry. Even Butch was made uncomfortable by Bruno's love affair.

Maria Bertorelli, the cause of all this trouble, was a widow of a corporal in the RAF Regiment. Dead for some three years, her husband had borne the awkward name of Thistlethwaite and, her Latin tongue coping inadequately with its sibilants, she had returned to Bertorelli, her maiden name, putting "Mrs." in front, to declare her widowhood. Forty, with jet-black hair sleek and unfaded, she had run a little to fat at the hips; but, tall with the Italian peasant's strong limbs, she had the peasant's earthy beauty which transcends age.

When the Air Force made her manageress of the canteen it was an inspired move, for Maria was everything a canteen manageress should be. She cooked fish and chips with an expertise foreign to this fish-and-chip-addicted land. Her chips first crackled, then melted to smoothest pleasure in the mouth. Her fried fish was not shrouded in soggy brown batter nor imprisoned inside a plating of hard paste. It was golden with breadcrumbs; firm but yielding; crisp yet soft. Never were fish and chips more worthy of their place as the airman's favourite food.

Equally superb were Maria's egg on chips and baked beans on toast; even her sausage and mash contrived to rise above the low level which this deadliest of foods normally accepted on the menus of airmen's canteens. But then Maria was Italian. And Italian women live on friendly terms with food.

At first Maria was no more intimate with Corporal Brunowski than with any of the other airmen or NCOs who used the canteen. Just one of many who often preferred her food to the mass production of the airmen's mess, Brunowski confined his conversation with her to the merest formalities. Now and again perhaps, he would venture a pleasantry, unrecognisable sometimes in his tortured English.

"It is weather for monkeys of brass," he would say as he shook the snow off his leather jerkin at morning break. "I will have a vodka to my coffee, Maria, and for my friends—twice size rums all round."

And Maria would smile as she poured their usual cups of instant coffee.

Always he was polite. Always the smile that only broad-faced Poles can encompass declared his good nature, and his simple intentions. Always, that is, until the time when he fell for Maria. Then his smile changed. His eyes no longer smiled with him. They looked, deeply, sadly, longingly into the soul of Maria Bertorelli. And Maria, seeing it, changed also.

It had happened at Easter. Most of the camp was away on block leave and Brunowski, one of a handful left on duty, was Orderly Corporal. He wandered into the canteen in late evening to find Maria alone behind the counter. The canteen, normally cheerless enough with its bare walls and tubular furniture, was depressing in its emptiness.

"I like two egg, poach, if you please," he told her.

Maria seemed almost to drag herself to her feet as she went to get eggs from the refrigerator. Brunowski, seeing her move reluctantly, felt in some way responsible.

"I give you trouble?"

"O.K. All right," Maria answered him. "I am a little tired, that is all."

"It is the spring," he told her. "In Poland, where I live, this is the time of the *czosnek*—how you say—garlic. When the stomach is heavy from the so-long winter, then we eat the *czosnek*. It grow wild in Poland. It is good for the estomach; make you feel better."

Maria looked at him, suddenly aware that he also was a stranger in a foreign land.

"In Italia too," she said, "it is the time for garlic. In my country it is called *aglio*." She broke two eggs into a basin. "You like instead the garlic omelette?" she asked him.

"With ham fat?" he suggested.

Maria nodded. "And with paprika; tomatoes . . ." she turned and looked at him, irresolute. "In my room there is Chianti," she told him. "Would you, perhaps, drink wine?"

But for Corporal Brunowski the pace was too fast. He had not the Latin impulsiveness which fired Maria. For him, she was still the canteen manageress.

"I just drink beer," he said, "in the corporals' club. Not good to drink wine after beer."

Maria, embarrassed by his refusal, turned busily to the making of her omelette. Brunowski leant his elbows on the counter and watched her as, back turned, she chopped ham fat, knife held,

blade flashing, in practised hands. He watched her squeeze a clove of garlic, then another. Olive oil began to smoke on the gas cooker beyond.

"You eat also?" he asked, shyly.

She nodded, not looking round.

"Eat with me," he said, suddenly generous. "I pay."

"*Grazie*," she replied, "But no matter—I make another, O.K., for my own supper. It is permitted."

"Let me pay," said Brunowski, earnestly. "I like. We have little party, O.K.?"

Maria gave him a slow, warm smile and handed him a table cloth over the counter.

"Make *couvert* for two," she told him, indicating a table in the corner of the deserted canteen. "Yes, let us have a party."

Never had Maria made an omelette with such artistry. Mushrooms appeared from nowhere to be chopped, fried then added to the ham fat, crisp brown now and fragrant; tomatoes were magically reduced to softest puree; parsley, parmesan, paprika and sliced green peppers stood ready to garnish Maria's splendid omelette. Corporal Brunowski, dancing between counter and table, laid new bread, butter, cheese, lettuce and thick-cut cucumber between two places set opposite, ready for the party.

"*Avanti, avanti*," cried Maria, eyes sparkling now as she poured beaten eggs into the pan, tilting, jerking, shaking, ever moving it as the golden tide congealed deliciously round the ham and mushrooms. Brunowski lifted the counter flap and was by her side, holding the plates for her to cut the great omelette into two parts. A little more for him, a man.

"Help yourself, help yourself," insisted Brunowski, seeing her put more on his plate.

"It is enough," she said. Then, "*Un momento,*" and she was off, to her room beyond the kitchen, to take off her overall and smooth back her heavy black hair.

"Bring some wine then, Maria," called Brunowski, as he carried the plates to their table. It was a party indeed.

"*Wyborny, wyborny!*" murmured Brunowski, as he tasted the splendid omelette. "Very good—very good."

"*La Dio mercè*," said Maria, piously, basking in his praise nonetheless.

"To Italia!" said Brunowski, holding his glass high.

"To Polanda!" cried Maria, drinking deeply. She looked at the corporal over her glass, her dark eyes bright with sudden astonishing happiness. "Italia and Polanda," she said.

For a time there was silence between them as Maria's omelette

did its insidious work, lulling them both into stunned contentment. Putting them at peace with their world—and with each other. Once, Maria went to her room for a second bottle of Chianti. Once, Brunowski went to the outside door and-locked it against any late-coming airman who might blunder into their paradise. They sat, the hours passing idly, but so softly. Slowly yet all too fast.

"*Piekna*—you are beautiful," Brunowski murmured, much later.

"You must not say such bad things," she told him. "They are not true."

"*Piekna*," he said again. "You are beautiful."

She diverted him. Told him about her husband, the Regiment corporal, and of his death—absurd death—under a bus. He slipped off the kerb. The bus was passing. It was over in ten seconds. They had been married ten years but they could have no children. Life was stupid. No reason for it; but God, of course, had a reason. It was wrong to say there was no reason.

Brunowski reached across and took her hand. It was strong, yet soft. A square, capable hand: a hand for work, and for caresses. He asked her why she did not go back to Italy. She shrugged and told him that when she married the British corporal—he was an LAC then, of course—her family would have nothing to do with her. It was being a Catholic and her husband not. But he was handsome, of course, and kind. Until later years; that was, until he got bored. They were both bored. Not having children did that. Then he was never at home.

Brunowski told her about himself. How, as a boy almost, he escaped from Poland when the Germans invaded. He said little about the war, not even mentioning the occasion of his *Virtute Militari* won as rear-gunner of a Wellington. Instead, he spoke of his life in England, his wife and family in Battersea. He showed Maria pictures of his children. Six of them, four boys and two girls. Maria held the tattered photographs in reverent fingers.

"*Bello bambino*," she exclaimed, raising her hand in rapt wonderment at such children. Brunowski glowed with pride.

He told her things he only dimly realised himself. How his children were English. His wife's children; speaking her strong London speech and looking shyly at him sometimes when he went home, as though he was a stranger. Often they could not understand what he said to them. Yet his wife was happy in Battersea. It was her home, with brothers and sisters to visit and invite in for tea.

Christmas was the time. Then it did not matter that he was a foreigner. It was all warm pleasure and contentment. But it was not easy to be Polish, in England.

For a long time they sat silent, contemplating their mutual solitude in a friendly but foreign land. The last of the wine was gone. Outside, the camp was still and dark; the night had closed down around them.

"You are a good man," said Maria at last."But it is sad to be alone. You should live with your wife—leave the Air Force."

"It is better that I visit," said the corporal. "There is not room for me all the time."

"You love your wife?" asked Maria.

"Yes—but of course," said Brunowski, surprised. "Is she not the mother of my kids?"

"Ah yes,"mused Maria. "That is right."

"And you?" he asked her. "What will you do?"

"If God wills," she replied, "I shall stay here."

"You waste your life."

"I am happy enough."

She stood up and he saw that she was crying. But not the ugly abandonment of childhood. She cried with dignity; it did not embarrass him. He understood, exactly.

"It is late," she said.

He nodded and, unthinking, followed her as she went to her room behind the kitchen, switching off the light in the canteen dining room as he went. At the door to her room she turned to face him.

"*Buona notte*," she said.

He looked beyond her at the little bed, pushed hard against the wall in the tiny room. Her rosary hung from one bedpost. There was a photograph of a man, the Regiment corporal, on the bedside table. It was a private place. A woman's place. He halted and she saw him draw his shoulders back and his heels came together. He bent forward stiffly from the waist and took her hand. He kissed it.

"Goodnight, madame," he said.

From this time, Maria Bertorelli blossomed behind the counter of the canteen. Never had her fish and chips been more delectable. She smiled and made little jokes, part in Italian, part in English, as she poured tea and coffee for her customers. And in inverse proportion to her gaiety, Corporal Brunowski declined into depression and despair.

It was not that Maria scorned him or even ignored him after

their party. Quite the opposite. When he came into the canteen she made no secret of her liking for him, fussing with cups and saucers behind the counter to see that he was served only with tea made fresh in the pot. And if he wanted a sandwich, only a new-made one would do; those kept ready under their plastic dome were not good enough for Corporal Brunowski.

And the coporal would sit, silently watching her; unembarrassed by her attentions, but sick with love for her.

Although all the station knew of Brunowski's infatuation, nobody could see any way of curing it. None, that is, except one airman who, dedicated to the welfare and happiness of man, could see deep to the roots of his unhappiness.

LEADING Aircraftman Samuel Likely enjoyed his job in sick-quarters. To the outsider it might seem that his work was confined to less romantic aspects of medicine—sweeping up after sick-parade, making tea for the MO and the Sergeant i/c, and other menial tasks—but this was very far indeed from the truth. The fact was that, on the advice of certain influential friends, amongst them the Wingco Admin and the Station Warrant Officer, LAC Likely had remustered to the important trade of nursing attendant.

"You and Doc Walker have a lot in common, Likely," the Wingco had told him, soon after the Amateur Dramatic Society closed down. "You could be a great help to each other."

And now, immersed in the great world of medicine, Samuel Likely felt that he had at last found his true vocation.

It was to the field of psychology that Likely first directed his attention. Certain books upon this valuable branch of medicine were kept in Doc Walker's surgery and Likely did not fail to avail himself of these during the long hours of vigil, guardian of the station's health through the dark hours, when his turn came up for Duty Medical Orderly.

It was in the course of one of these night watches that Samuel Likely found an opportunity to exercise his new-found powers of helping, if not healing, the sick. There were no in-patients and he was watching television in the empty ward, when in walked Corporal Brunowski, looking as miserable as he could be.

"I want you to give me something for my stomach," he told Likely. "It is very bad." He belched deeply to emphasise his condition. "I not sleep well. With food there is no pleasure for me."

Likely studied him with a professional eye.

"Any pain?" he asked.

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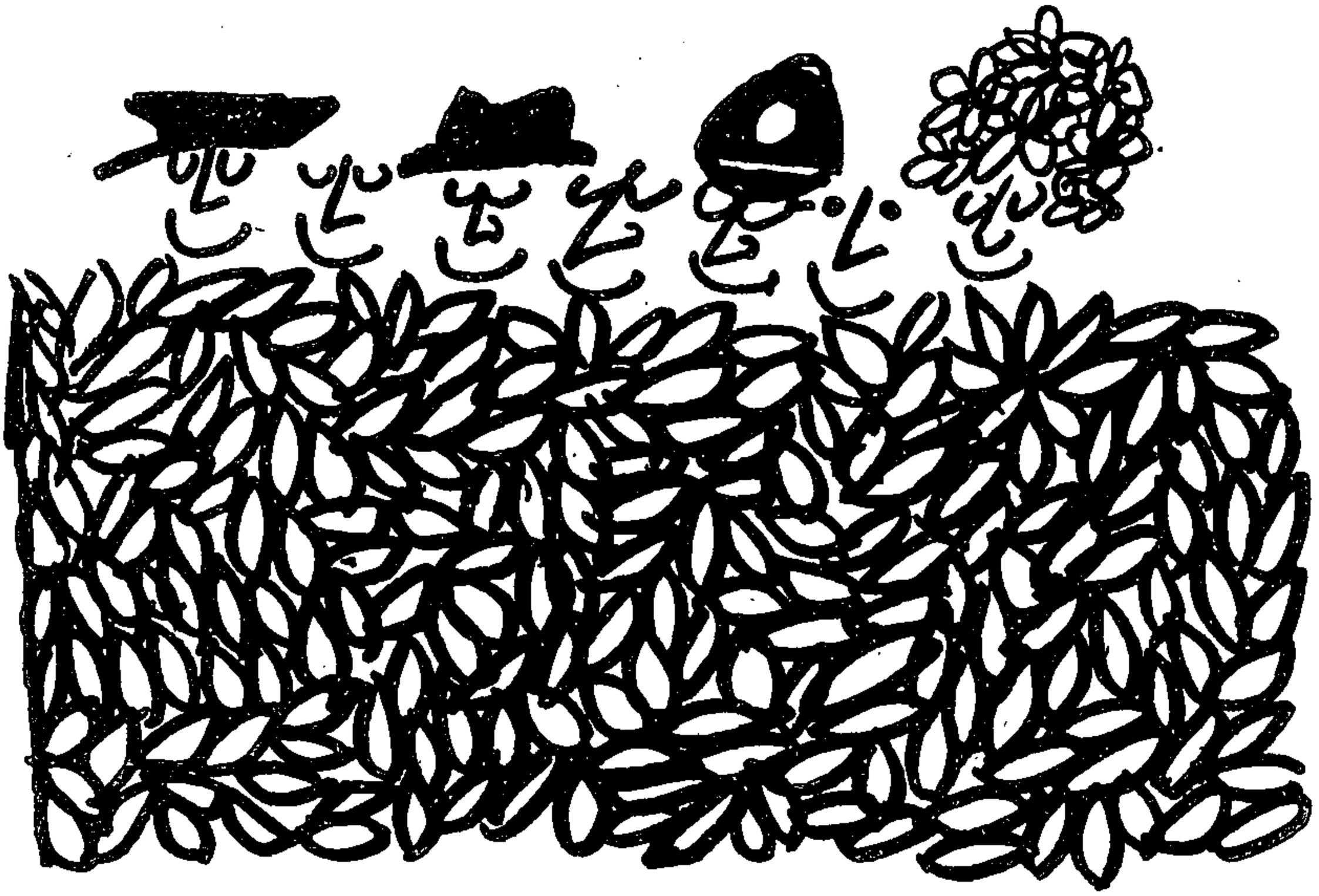

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"No," said Brunowski. "Just that I am, how you say, blow up."

LAC Likely led him to the MI room and there, taking a small bottle labelled, mysteriously, "Sod. Bicarb.", he mixed a strong potion with the dispenser's practised hand. As his patient drank the mixture, he studied him, narrowly.

"It's psychological," he said at last. "That's the trouble."

"How you mean?" asked Brunowski, suspiciously. "My stomach hurt, here." He indicated an area adjacent to his navel.

"Typical symptom," affirmed Likely. "Almost a classical case of psycho-neurosis."

Corporal Brunowski looked doubtfully at him. "You not make joke of me?" he asked, dangerously.

"Look. Sit down, Corp," said Likely. "Let's 'ave a quiet chat." Brunowski sat awkwardly on the edge of his chair whilst Likely paced the room, hands clasped behind his back, his keen mind focused on the problem of Brunowski's stomach.

"You see," Likely told him, "we all 'ave an Ego."

"A what?" enquired Brunowski, deeply puzzled.

"An Ego," repeated Likely. "A bloke called Frude discovered that. And it's this Ego that gets all upset when things go wrong. It makes you sick in the stomach, see?"

"But nothing go wrong," the corporal told him. "What has gone wrong?"

"Ah," said Likely. "That's what we've got to find out."

He took Brunowski firmly but reassuringly by the arm and led him gently into the Doc's surgery.

"Lie down there," he said, pointing to the examination couch. "And try to relax."

Corporal Brunowski climbed awkwardly on to the couch and lay back with a deep sigh of relief. His boots stuck up absurdly and his tunic; stretched taut round his vast chest, strained dangerously at buttons worn smooth by years of Brasso and elbow grease. He heaved himself into a comfortable position and closed his eyes.

"Now what you got, Corporal, is tension," said Likely, his voice soothing and yet authoritative. "You don't know you got tension. It's your sub-conscious, see."

"What is sub-conscious, please?" asked Brunowski, opening his eyes momentarily.

"That's the bit of the Ego what stays awake when you go to sleep, see," Likely told him. "Gives you dreams and that."

"I see," said Brunowski, closing his eyes and composing himself once more in the state of relaxation he was finding all too

easy to assume. The voice of LAC Likely penetrated his comfort. Strangely far off, it seemed.

"Do you dream, Corporal?" asked the voice.

"Ah," said Brunowski. "Such beautiful dreams. She is so lovely, that one. I love her."

"Who do you love, Corporal?" came the voice.

"Do you not know?" asked Brunowski from the depths of his warm, secure relaxation. "It is Maria Bertorelli that I love. *Piekny*—I told her. You are beautiful."

"Does she love you?" asked the voice.

"Of course," said Brunowski. "What else? But, of course, there is my wife and the kids . . ."

"Is that why you are unhappy, Corporal?" came the voice, even further off now.

"Unhappy," murmured Brunowski, "Yes—unhappy—unhappy . . ." His voice trailed off. He was asleep.

LAC Likely looked at him in amazement. "Cor," he said. "It works!"

Sergeant Henry Smith, senior NCO in charge of station sick-quarters, was a man of precise habits. A bachelor in his early forties, prolonged celibacy had made him an old woman prematurely. And as Likely soon discovered, old women rarely make good masters. The sergeant's immutable daily routine passed well-defined milestones at precisely predictable times. His first cup of tea was scheduled at twenty to ten, by which time sick-parade was over and medical inspection not begun. At ten o'clock he made a routine visit to the MI room and dispensary to see if all was ready for the MO's morning appointments; ten forty-five was the time for a second cup of tea with, on Mondays, an Eccles cake, on Tuesdays a doughnut, on Wednesdays a cream slice. There were other pre-planned confections for the other three days of the working week.

The rest of the day was regulated by similar activities, none of which could be varied in even minor respects, without painful effect upon temper and goodwill. The sick-quarters staff was absolutely in accord when it came to the subject of Sergeant Smith. They all agreed, without one dissenting voice, that he was a perfect ruddy misery.

The morning which followed Likely's interesting psycho-analysis of Brunowski gave every sign of becoming one of Sergeant Smith's less tractable days. First he tore Likely off a monumental strip for letting dust collect on the water in a fire bucket he happened to notice on the way to his office. Then SAC Bryn

Lewis, the other nursing attendant, caught a packet from him when hé took him his first cup of tea five minutes earlier than the scheduled time.

"Can't you see I'm still busy, making up sick reports?" he snapped at Bryn. "Bring it back at the proper time, and make sure it's hot as well."

"There's not a bit of good it does, to try to please the bastard," said Bryn without rancour. "He's hopeless."

"It's his age," commented Likely. "He's 'ad a mother fixation all his life and this is what it's brought him to."

"What in ever do you mean?" asked Bryn. "What is mother fixation when it's at home?"

"He's a typical case," Likely replied. "Dependent all 'is life on mother's love, and now he's deprived of it, 'e turns inwards. He's introverted. That's what's wrong with 'im."

"His mother's dead, then?" enquired Bryn, who was a gentle soul inclined to sympathise with the weaknesses of others. Even bastard sergeants.

"Whether she's dead or not," said Likely, a trifle impatient with this display of ignorance, "she's not been around dishing out mother love whilst we've been 'ere, 'as she? I mean, not so as you'd notice."

"You mean that he's sex-starved?" asked Bryn, oblivious to the sarcasm.

"Frude wouldn't hardly 'ave put it that way," said Likely, loftily. "But it could be said that you are on the right lines. That is, crudely put, the trouble."

Bryn considered the situation.

"Evans the post, in our village, was just the same," he observed. "A proper old woman until he married Lewis Jones's widow and then he changed completely. Not a girl in Pentwyhelli would go into the shop alone after that. They said they didn't trust the look he had in his eye." He smiled at the memory. "Of course," he went on, "Lewis Jones was undertaker and monumental mason for years and years, so Evans the post must have come into a tidy bit when he married Lewis Jones's widow. And that makes a great difference to a man you know."

But Samuel Likely was not listening. A great truth had come to him. A great psychological truth.

"When one bloke is full of misery on account of not 'aving any sex and another bloke is eatin' his 'eart out because he's got too much," he said thoughtfully, "there might be a way of curing both blokes with the same bird." A great grin of pleasure spread across Likely's face. " 'Ere," he said, "that was all right, wasn't

it? Cure both blokes with one bird! Pretty good, eh?" And LAC Likely broke into a laugh.

Bryn Lewis had never seen Likely laugh before. He always thought of him as a serious type, not given to humour. As he looked at Samuel now, laughing at his own joke, that impression was reinforced. The laugh seemed to strike a chill note, somehow. It wasn't the sort of laughter that invited reciprocation. It seemed to mean trouble, for somebody, fairly soon.

From the very outset Bryn Lewis had never been quite happy about Likely's plan. Intimate knowledge of one's neighbour's affairs was normal and expected in his native Pentwyhelli, but interference was a different matter. Many a time his father had drummed it into him.

"Never stick your nose into other people's affairs, Bryn boyo," he had said. "It's not a bit of good trying to stop a man from beating his wife; he'll only give you a bloody nose and she won't thank you either."

Now, faced with the realities of Likely's psycho-therapy, Bryn Lewis was wishing he had taken his father's advice. But LAC Likely had asked him to lend a hand with the sergeant, so that was that. If it worked and Sergeant Smith became more tolerable, it would be worth it.

They had chosen late afternoon as the best time for their initial approach, relying upon the four-fifteen cup of tea to weaken the defences in advance. Smith's first reaction on their entry to his office was not very promising.

"Say what you want—and quick," he said, shutting his desk drawer upon his library book.

"It's a personal matter, Sarge," said Likely, his thick lens spectacles directed apprehensively at him.

"We're a—sort of delegation, as you might say," said Bryn, carefully rehearsed. "The airmen in our billet have asked us to kind of—represent them—if you follow . . ."

Such highly emotive terms as "redress of grievance" and "formal request for an interview with the commanding officer" began to rise before the sergeant's eyes as he looked at the delegation. He began to bristle and, sensing it, Bryn quickly told him, "We want your advice, Sergeant, upon a very delicate matter . . ."

Smith relaxed at once into benign calm. It was good to be asked advice. Showed proper respect for superior knowledge and experience.

"Take your caps off and sit down, lads," he said, with such

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kindness that they at first hesitated, thinking it might still be just an unfamiliar prelude to rage. But it was not. "Let's hear your troubles," he said, and his face cracked into the nearest thing they had ever seen to a smile.

"Well," began Likely, "It's the canteen, Sarge. We airmen use the canteen a fair bit on account of the grub in the cookhouse gettin' on your wick, day in day out the same."

"You have ten choices," the sergeant told him, unsympathetically, "which is nine more than we get in the sergeants' mess."

"It *is* the choices, Sarge," broke in Bryn, helpfully. "They get bloody monotonous after a bit, you know. It makes you want to eat something plain and simple—like egg on chips."

"So we go to the canteen a fair bit," concluded Likely, relieved that they had at last reached first base without disaster.

"O.K.," said the sergeant, who was fast losing interest. "So you use the canteen quite a bit." His voice was becoming ominously loud. "Get on with it," he said.

"Well," said Likely, approaching the point of no return with great caution, "It's Maria. She's been moonin' about the place and—well, she don't seem to have her *heart* in the cookin'."

"Absent-minded, she is," added Bryn, taking up his cue. "Only yesterday she gave me coffee and a bun when I asked as clearly as I am speaking to you this moment for a cup of char and a ham butty."

"She give me poached eggs *swimmin'* in water," said Likely, his voice lifting to a higher register to express the full enormity of the situation.

"Well?" enquired the sergeant, rather sharply. "What's that got to do with me? You've got tongues, haven't you? Give it to her straight. She's paid to do a job just like me and you."

"We was hoping you wouldn't take it like that, Sarge," said Likely, solemnly.

"There's kind and helpful you are," said Bryn, quickly. "We were hoping that you could make Maria—happier—be more friendly."

Sergeant Smith's eyes widened. His jaw sagged.

"Friendly?" he gasped. "Me?"

"Yes, Sarge," said Likely, more confident now. "Seeing as she's so soft on you, we thought that if you'd be nicer to her—well, she'd be 'appier and do her job better. That's all we thought, Sergeant."

"Soft on me?" echoed the sergeant, getting angrily to his feet. "Soft on me? What the 'ell are you talking about? Get out of here before I put you on a charge."

"She told us so herself," said Bryn, retreating slowly to the door.

"She said she couldn't get you out of her mind."

"Get out!" shouted the sergeant.

"It's pukka gen, Sarge," Likely told him as he also made a withdrawal to safety. "She said you don't pay no attention to her and it's breakin' her 'eart."

The two airmen gone, Sergeant Smith sat down again at his desk to consider this extraordinary situation. It was true, of course, that he called at the back door of the canteen every morning at exactly twenty-five minutes past eight. Maria Bertorelli handed him his daily cake in a paper bag, in accordance with the standing order he had given her when he first arrived on posting; but there had never been anything between them.

When it was cold he remarked upon it, and when it was hot, rainy, foggy or drizzly, he remarked upon it. That was only civil and he could hardly take the paper bag from her every day without saying something. Now he thought of it, Maria had been a bit forgetful of late. Only the previous week she gave him a cheese roll on a Friday instead of the usual sausage roll, and by the time he'd discovered it there wasn't time to send an erk round to get it changed.

She was a handsome woman, there was no doubt about that. Good figure too, although until that moment he'd never seriously thought about it. But soft on him—it was going to make it a bit embarrassing picking up his cake in the morning, knowing that she was eating her heart out because he took no notice of her.

It could be a leg-pull, of course. Although it was hard to believe that those two miserable erks would dare to put one over on him. He felt the anger rising as the thought grew within him. No. He could forget that. They wouldn't dare.

Sergeant Smith got up and crossed to the window. The trees planted by the Ministry of Works along the camp roads were at their very best. He was feeling unusually young and active today. It was good to be alive sometimes. Yes, it was indeed; very good to be alive.

MARIA Bertorelli looked at herself in the mirror on her small dressing table and noticed how much better her complexion looked since she had taken to using the skin food recommended by the manageress of the NAAFI shop. Normally, Maria would not have bothered to use one, but Corporal Brunowski's attentions had made her more conscious of her

appearance. Stupid, of course. He was a married man and there was nothing to it. But it was sad being alone, a widow; and it was natural, she supposed, for a woman to want to look her best when a man admired her. Even if he was married and—out of reach.

And now there was this Sergeant Smith. She found it hard to believe that he had secretly loved her all these months, calling in day after day for his cake. Never more than passing the time of day, and paying her each week on a Friday. Always exactly one and tenpence. The two airmen had told her that it was because, lately, she had become so much brighter and more attractive. And there was no doubt that she had taken more care of her appearance since that little party with Corporal Brunowski. "*Piekny*," he had said. "*Piekny*—you are beautiful."

Maria went out to the kitchen to make herself some breakfast and on the way she took Sergeant Smith's cake from the tin and put it in a bag ready to give to him when he called. It was the day for a doughnut, and she took more care than usual to find one that had not been bruised, the sugar smeared and dull, from being kept overnight. The sergeant had admired her for many months, the airmen said. Strange that she had never noticed it. But men are not easy to understand. They can be as shy as children; even grown men.

She made herself some coffee and sat in the big kitchen, more aware than usual of its emptiness—the cleaner did not come on duty until nine o'clock. She found herself listening for Sergeant Smith coming into the yard. She seemed to wait for an hour, although it was only minutes before she heard him lean his bicycle against the coke-bin outside the door. He was five minutes early. She was sure that had never happened before. Then came his familiar knock on the back door. Tappity-tap-tap. Never even a different knock. Tappity-tap-tap. But this time it meant something quite different to Maria.

She felt her heart racing as she took the doughnut from the table, and pushing an errant strap back into place inside the arm of her dress, she went down the dark passage along the strip of shapeless coconut matting to the back door.

"Morning," said Sergeant Smith, looking at her as though for the first time. "We're going to have a drop of rain later, I think."

"Good morning, Sergeant," said Maria. "Here is your cake. A doughnut this morning, O.K.?"

She handed it to him and instead of mumbling his thanks and putting the cake in his saddlebag as he usually did, the sergeant seemed unable to move. For that matter, nor could Maria. The

two of them stood staring at each other for a long, long moment until at last Sergeant Smith said, "Well, thank you very much. I'll—er—I'll pay you for them tomorrow," and went to his bicycle, putting the doughnut into the saddlebag.

"Tomorrow is a Wednesday, Sergeant," Maria called after him. "You not pay till a Friday, isn't it?"

"Yes, of course," said Smith, tripping awkwardly over the pedal of his bicycle in the haste of embarrassment. "Friday."

He suddenly giggled, uncontrollably, as though some great pent-up emotion was released. And Maria laughed also. Laughter did not come easily to Sergeant Smith, so that his was thin and nasal. Maria's laughter was warm and smiling, shaking her hips and making her gasp for breath.

"It is always on Friday that you pay me," she said. "Always—always, never on a Wednesday. It would be a funny thing indeed if you paid on a Wednesday!"

Then he was gone; wobbling a little as, with nervous haste, he cycled out of the yard.

Maria walked slowly back to the kitchen and sat down to finish her breakfast. He was really very handsome, the sergeant. Small, but there is, after all, a saying in Italy about small men . . . And he was not married.

A few minutes later, Joe Grimes, the civilian stoker on his way to the boiler house, heard a song coming from the staff quarters behind the canteen. It was a woman's voice and she was singing *O Sole Mio* with such splendid verve and colour that he stood for a moment and listened. The last time Maria Bertorelli sang that song was in a kitchen in far-off Italy. She sang it on the day before she married Senior Aircraftman Thistlethwaite of the RAF Regiment.

For Sergeant Henry Smith, the world had changed during the past few days from an intractable, badly-organised affair in perpetual need of correction, to a place of harmony and peace. His two nursing attendants had become efficient and surprisingly helpful, looking after his personal needs with a regularity which almost amounted to devotion. The MO, not usually an easy man to please, had gone out of his way to be pleasant; even, on one occasion, complimenting him upon the flowers in the entrance hall which Smith had personally collected, on an impulse of sudden gaiety, from flower beds round the section.

And now, at last, the day had come. He was taking Maria Bertorelli to the camp cinema.

When he asked her to go with him, every nerve in his body

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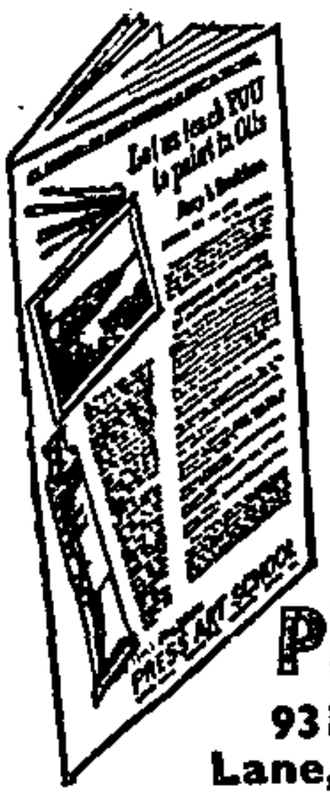

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was stretched taut, waiting for her answer. If she had said No, he could not bear to think of what he would have done. To have been refused by her, perhaps even snubbed, would have been agonising, intolerable. But she did not refuse. She was delighted; agreed to come without any hesitation as if she had been expecting him to ask her. It was a great relief, and very flattering. He did not ride his bicycle out of the yard that morning. He pushed it, walking slowly, casually—a giant amongst sergeants. It was his first conquest and the taste of it was sweet.

Now, sitting in his office, waiting for time to pass until he would meet Maria, he felt as excited and apprehensive as a boy going to his first party. He looked at his watch; it was five-fifteen and he was meeting Maria at six-thirty. He would have to change into civvies first, and then have a bite of tea. It would not leave him much time. But Maria had to be back on duty at eight-thirty, so it had to be the first show at the cinema. He had raced through his paper-work hours ago and now he had nothing to do. Sergeant Smith fidgeted with a scalpel he used for opening letters and cutting string. It was officially unserviceable, of course. Now he examined its blade, felt it on his thumb. It was still as sharp as a razor.

There was a knock on his door and he looked up, relieved by this sudden diversion of his thoughts.

It was Corporal Brunowski, huge, aggressively foreign despite his uniform.

"Please may I speak with you, Sergeant?" he asked.

Smith indicated a chair and Brunowski sat awkwardly on the edge, his great hands twisting his cap into agonising shapes.

"I know that tonight you take Maria Bertorelli to the cinema," he began. Then a wave of embarrassment swept over him and his composure left him. "You will, please, excuse if I speak so of your private matters," he said. "It is a great worry to me and I *have* to speak of it."

Sergeant Smith felt suddenly vulnerable. Was his great adventure to prove just a sordid indiscretion after all? This is what he had always feared. You could never tell with women; that was why he had kept clear of them.

"What's the trouble, Bruno?" he asked as casually as his voice would allow. "She's O.K., isn't she?"

"You love Maria?" asked Brunowski, simply.

"She seems a good sort," the sergeant replied. "I don't know her all that well, though."

"She love you," said Brunowski. "She tell me."

There was tragedy in his eyes as he said this and he looked

infinitely tired. He stopped twisting his cap and threw it on a nearby chair. Then he sat back, resigned to what he had to do.

"You must not hurt her," he said. "She already been hurt, very bad. You understand, O.K.?"

Sergeant Smith was relieved. So that was it. He stood up and, absurdly, found it difficult to speak. He couldn't recall experiencing this kind of emotion.

"O.K., I understand," was all he could bring himself to say. Brunowski said the rest. He stood up also and unsmilingly held out his great hand to Smith, who took it. Solemnly the two men shook hands.

It was more than unfortunate that Maria should have eaten garlic before meeting Sergeant Smith. It was disastrous. She had been feeling queasy for a day or two, perhaps because of the new excitements which had so suddenly come into her life, and had recalled Brunowski saying how good garlic was for the stomach. She chopped it, very fine, into a salad for her lunch. And by the time she met Sergeant Smith by the guardroom her stomach was feeling easier already.

Smith caught the first whiff of it as they turned out of the camp gates to walk to the cinema. He had met it before when he was serving in Malta and had always connected it with the stinking drains and sour dust which, for him, made foreigners a filthy dirty lot, inferior in all respects to the British. He had not thought of Maria in this way but, glancing at her now as they walked together, he could not keep Malta out of his mind. The flies; glimpses inside squalid tenements, swarming with half-dressed brats and dominated by the rasping, nagging voices of Italian mothers. All Italian women, he remembered, seemed to be either pregnant or infested with children. He heard Maria saying something to him and he turned to hear her, receiving a full blast of garlic which sickened him.

"It is a good-a film we see," she said. "Carlotto Prancini is in it." She laughed happily. "He is Italian," she added. "Very good man; he make-a you cry!"

Inside the cinema, Maria's breath made the film an agony for Sergeant Smith. Luckily, it was the first showing, they were almost the only ones there, but when a couple did come in at the start of the main feature and settled just in front, they soon found Maria's garlic intolerable and moved elsewhere with many embarrassing exclamations of disapproval as they went.

But Maria did not notice; she was entirely captivated by the film. It was a comedy which came, at times, very close to tears,

and at one touching moment, when her Italian hero was facing death with the happy ending still only a faint hope for the future, her hand sought Smith's for comfort. He held it, flinching slightly at the touch. And when, a little later, Maria became conscious of it and withdrew her hand, he made no move to renew the contact on his own initiative.

When it was over and they emerged into the sunlight of late evening, Maria was radiantly happy. She spoke in high praise of the great Carlotto Prancini and the sadness yet gaiety of the film. And Sergeant Smith, crushed in spirit, listened to her without a word, as they walked back to camp.

It was merciful, perhaps, that the film had finished rather later than expected and, as they entered the gates, Maria looked at her watch to find that it was already half-past eight. She had to hurry; and the last part of their walk to the canteen was too quick either for Maria to notice her companion's glum silence or for Smith to need resources of conversation to cover his wretchedness.

At the back door to the canteen, as the sergeant said goodnight, Maria was suddenly overcome with tenderness for this quiet Englishman who had taken her out of her loneliness and given her back a woman's self-respect. She stepped forward and kissed him on the cheek.

"*Grazie tante!*" she said softly.

Sergeant Smith looked back at her as she ran quickly through the doorway and he heard her singing a little as she went down the passage to her room. He could still smell the garlic of her breath as she had put her face to his for that kiss.

He went off to the sergeants' mess, sickened and feeling suddenly very alone.

IT was several nights later that Corporal Brunowski went to the canteen for a cup of tea. He had not been there since his talk with Sergeant Smith. Maria's happiness, then, was more than he could bear, for he knew that it was because of the sergeant, not of him. Now at last he had made himself see her once again, perhaps to congratulate her upon future marriage to the sergeant. He would be a lucky one to marry her . . .

"Good evening, Maria," he greeted her. "A cup of tea, if you please."

She did not speak, turning her back to him as she poured his tea. He waited for her greeting, looking at her in surprise.

"Is there something bad that happen?" he asked.

Maria shook her head as she handed him the brimming cup, slopping a little into the saucer. As she turned he could see that she was unhappy, her eyes dull and her dress untidy as though she did not care any more.

"The sergeant," asked Brunowski. "Does he take you out again?"

She shook her head, unable to find words.

"I no see him for many days," she said at last, her face stiff and expressionless. "He no comes no more for his cakes. Never does he come now." She shrugged. "Perhaps he is busy. Who knows?"

"Did you have bad words?" asked Brunowski, his anger rising as he saw her distress.

"No bad words—no," said Maria. "He just not come back."

Corporal Brunowski banged his cup down on the counter. He was breathing hard, and Maria could see that he was white with anger.

"It no matter," she said simply. "Maybe I say something he not-a like. Maybe he got a girl some other place. I not know."

"He cannot *do* this," said Brunowski in a quiet voice. "I shall tell him that he cannot do it."

"No, no!" exclaimed Maria as she saw him make for the door. "Come back, *Caporale*."

But it was too late. The corporal was on his way.

Two sergeants, going out together, looked curiously at Brunowski as he went down the long passage in the sergeants' quarters. When he found Sergeant Smith's room he burst in, his anger still hot. Smith was lying on his bed, reading.

"What the hell . . ." he began; then he saw the expression on Brunowski's face and moved quickly to his feet.

"Why you do such a thing?" demanded the corporal. "Why you hurt Maria?"

The sergeant looked badly shaken. It is not pleasant to be faced with a man as big as Brunowski, white with anger.

"She stank of garlic," he said flatly. "I couldn't stand it."

Brunowski started forward as though to hit him, but restrained himself in time.

"You will come now and see her," he told the sergeant, speaking quietly, his hands clenched. "Tell her you have had much work. Ask her to go out with you again."

Smith turned away. He knew now that the corporal would not attack him. It would mean court martial if he did, and no woman is worth that.

"She will get over it," he said casually.

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He felt a hand on his shoulder; then he was spun round to face Brunowski.

"You break her heart," he said. "In Poland we kill men who do this. I kill you; unless you do as I say."

It was absurd, of course. Men did not kill each other for the love of a canteen manageress. The whole thing was hopelessly out of proportion. But then, Brunowski was not an ordinary man. He was a Pole with an award for the greatest bravery of which man is capable.

Killing would be easy for him with those great hands, coal-engrained in the palms.

"I didn't know she was so upset," said Smith meekly.

The two men walked silently along the camp roads to the canteen. There was nothing to be said. Both were absorbed in their own thoughts; Smith with the agony of reliving that hideous, mistaken middle-aged adventure; Brunowski with doubts, as his anger cooled, about his right to interfere in the lives of these two people. Perhaps it was for the best. Could it be only his pride that was hurt? That this man, this sergeant, could reject the woman he loved. Loved her so deeply that he was unable to face his own wife and children. His doubts were not put at rest by the sergeant, who in sudden self-recrimination burst out, "You were dead right, Corporal. I shouldn't have left her flat. I'll see if I can put it straight for her."

"Good, good," murmured Brunowski, and they went on, more at ease together, towards the canteen.

Maria was not behind the counter when they arrived, and the canteen was empty. They waited; then Brunowski tapped on the counter with a coin and when she still did not come, Sergeant Smith called out, "Shop," in a thin, embarrassed voice which broke and brought him to the edge of a nervous giggle.

"Come," said Brunowski, lifting the counter flap. And the two men walked awkwardly through the kitchen towards the living quarters beyond.

They found Maria in her room; she had been crying and she got up as they opened the door, her face red and swollen.

"What-a you want?" she asked them, her voice hoarse and strained.

"The sergeant come to say he is sorry to have hurt you, Maria," said Brunowski softly.

"I—I didn't know. I should have come to see you again," said the sergeant. "I don't know why I didn't—I'm sorry."

"He wants now that you go out with him again," said the

other. "It would be nice, Maria. Not to the cinema this time. Somewhere much better, eh, Sergeant?" The corporal smiled encouragingly, nodding his approval of the sergeant's good intentions.

Maria looked from one to the other. She was no longer tearful, only angry now.

"*Dio!*" she said. "What-a you think I am?" She advanced towards them, hands on hips like any Italian peasant woman scolding her children.

"Go to hell!" she yelled at them. "I no want-a to go with the bloody sergeant! Get out of here!"

The two men retreated in front of her.

"But Maria . . ." protested Brunowski. "It was a mistake—the sergeant, he is very sorry."

"Sorry! Sorry!" shouted Maria. "What is that? Sorry! Get out, get out! I no care."

She slammed the door in their faces.

Smith and Brunowski sat in the bar parlour of the Black Swan, slightly drunk and with more drink in contemplation.

"Women are very strange," said Sergeant Smith, feeling a warm glow of friendship for this big Polish corporal who seemed to understand him so well. "You are quite right when you say they blow hot and cold like the east and west wind."

"It is a Polish saying," said Brunowski, nodding his head in solemn affirmation of its deep truth. "Only men do not change from one day to the next."

"It's a pity, really," said the sergeant. "She's been a good-looker in her time, too."

"Yes," said Brunowski. "A good-looker." He stretched his legs under the table and yawned deeply. "I think next week I apply for leave," he said, and there was just a shade of sadness in his voice. "It is my son Ivan's birthday."

The sergeant looked at him and could see his own reflection. He shuddered.

One thing it had taught him, once and for all. Marriage wasn't for him; that was certain.

LAC Likely came out of the sergeant's office, empty cup and saucer in his hand. It was remarkable what his psycho-therapy had done for Smith. For a week or two he had believed it to be a failure, for the sergeant had been worse than ever, cursing and blinding and not even bothering to get himself a cake each day from the canteen. And now, suddenly, he was a different man,

happy and cheerful. Medical science was indeed a very wonderful thing.

"Psychology, that's what it is," he had told Bryn Lewis. "Elementary psychology."

But the Welshman was not quite so sure about it.

"There is right my dad was," he said firmly. " 'Never interfere with other folks' affairs' is what he always said. The bloody sergeant is happy, boyo, but Maria's eggs on chips have gone off something terrible."

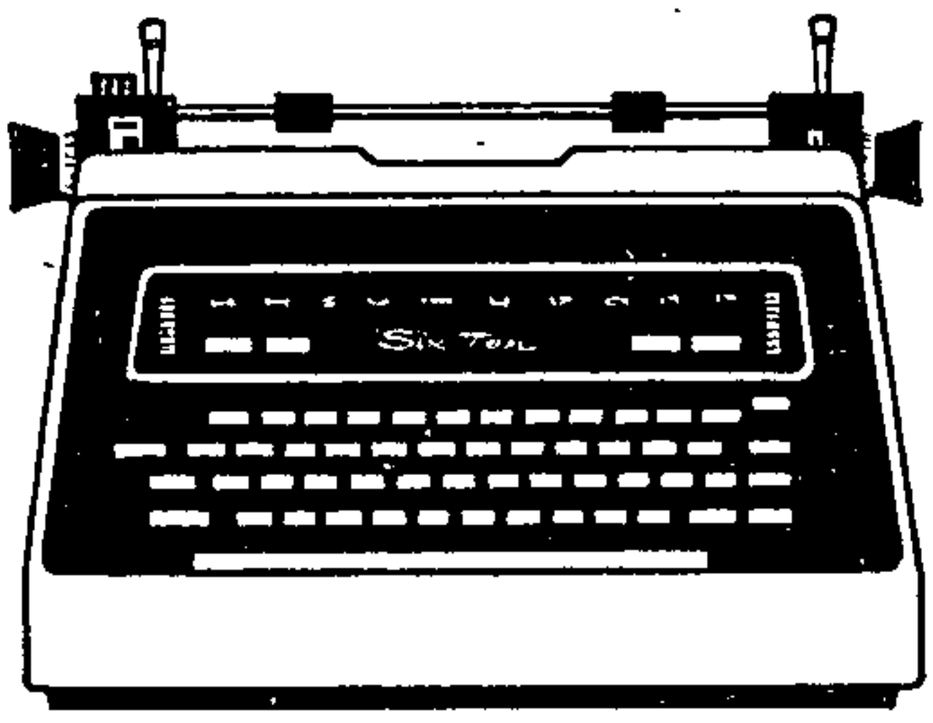
© Harry Sutton 1967

□ABOUT THE AUTHOR. Harry Sutton has recently retired from the RAF, aged fifty-two and with the rank of Group Captain. As an operational pilot, he gained the DFC in World War II, and he also has the OBE. His service has taken him to the Mediterranean and the Far East; and his knowledge of the latter has inspired many articles. But for Sutton authorship has been more than a mere hobby; and now, living at Purley, in Surrey, he is engaged in writing school history books. He claims that short story writing provides light relief.

ANSWERS TO BIRDS AND BEASTS QUIZ

1. *Aunt Dot in "The Towers of Trebizond" by Rose Macaulay.*
2. *Boney in "Whiteoak Chronicles" by Mazo de la Roche.*
3. *Lord Emsworth's prize sow in "Uncle Fred in the Springtime" by P. G. Wodehouse.*
4. *G. K. Chesterton in "The Donkey".*
5. *Tom Pearce in "Widecombe Fair"—West Country song.*
6. *Macavity in "Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats" by T. S. Eliot.*
7. *Virginia Woolf in "Flush"—Elizabeth Barrett Browning's dog.*
8. *Thomas Hardy in "The Oxen".*
9. *Charles Dickens—his raven Grip.*
10. *Count Fosco in "The Woman in White" by Wilkie Collins.*
11. *An owl and a cat in "The Owl and the Pussy-cat" by Edward Lear.*
12. *"The Eagle" by Tennyson.*
13. *The Mole in "The Wind in the Willows" by Kenneth Grahame.*
14. *Latimer Springfield in "The Lull" by Saki.*
15. *"Puts all Heaven in a rage". From "Blake's Testament" by William Blake.*

STORM OVER SHARBOTTLE



New Books by A. R. Byers

OF this Spring's early crop of novels, David Bean's *The Big Meeting* (Secker and Warburg, 30s.) struck me as being by far the most arresting and ambitious. It is a large-scale work, that sets out to describe the impact of industrial and social change on the people of the North of England. Encompassed within this scheme is the conflict of generations, classes and personalities.

Bean is a novelist first and foremost, and he does not allow *The Big Meeting* to turn into a tract by over-stating the problems. These are referred to in an oblique way that does not distort the shape of his characters or the sober mood of his story.

The setting of the novel is in Durham and a small nearby town called Sharbottle. The occasion referred to in the title is the annual gathering of miners, lodge by union lodge, in Durham on Gala Day. It is a spectacular event for a hot summer Saturday, with the bands playing and banners waving, and brave anthems on the lips of the marchers. But for the citizens from Sharbottle this Gala Day has added significance—it is their last. At the back of their minds, they all know that in three months' time the last pit, the Amalie, will be closed.

Among the marchers from Sharbottle is Isaac "Ikey" Brock, a man who has fought long and hard during the dark days of the Twenties and the Thirties for a better, a spiritually richer way of life, and who now realises that his efforts have been for nothing. In the milling crowd are the other Sharbottle people, all of them bound one to the other by ties of blood, or servitude, or love.

There is Ikey's complacent brother Big Brock, who, by moving with the times, has gained wealth and position, and his wife, the socially ambitious Agnes, and their son, Clive, who has been

corrupted by easy affluence. And, standing in a window of a hotel, watching the passing parade, is Ikey's own estranged wife, *Molly, now companion to the sadly withdrawn Lady Shill, whose* husband once owned the Amalie pit.

And now running through the crowd comes Kathy, the Australian girl who came to Sharbottle to re-discover her roots, running to warn Ikey of impending danger . . .

What author Bean has done is to use the Gala Day march to stage a shattering confrontation between all the participants in this complex drama. Unfortunately, having tied up a good dramatic knot, Bean then unravels it all too quickly. This "big meeting" to which the whole novel has been building lacks impact, and the author seems unwilling to draw any effective conclusions from it—but perhaps this is a small criticism to make of a novel that is such absorbing reading.

☐ LIGHT FANTASTIC. *Short Friday* (Secker and Warburg, 30s.) is a collection of sixteen stories by the famous author, Isaac Bashevis Singer, who writes in Yiddish. They have been so beautifully rendered into English by the author and by other translators that one must assume some of the intensity of the originals has come through. Most of these stories should rightly be called fables or allegories, for they are fantastic in their treatment and each carries a moral. Their subject is the *shtetl* (Jewish village) life in Poland, where, for centuries, Yiddish culture flourished.

Singer is at his best when he is re-creating this lost world and, in the words of Henry Miller, what a "wonderful, wonderful world, a terrible and beautiful world" it is.

The *genre* in which Singer is working is one that has long been abandoned by English writers, and so his stories strike the modern reader as being strange and *new*. In Singer's writing, the unexpected is common, and the real does not exist. And always these stories bring home a strong comment on the ways of man —sometimes lightly or mockingly, and sometimes with a wide-eyed amazement that such things should come to pass.

Consider this after you have read Singer's fable *Blood*, in which the evil heroine falls so passionately in love with a ritual slaughterer that she becomes a wild creature herself; or *Big and Little*, in which a small man, ridiculed by his wife, takes revenge by hiring a giant of an assistant to help in his shop. These stories, along with *Yentel, the Yeshiva Boy* and *Esther Kriendel the Second* are perhaps the best in the collection. It is only when Singer leaves this special world that one notices a slight drop in intensity, as for example in his American stories.

☐ SURPRISING SURRENDER. Allen Dulles, the former head of America's Central Intelligence Agency, has written a remarkable and surprising account of the capitulation of the German Army in Italy in April 1945, an event that helped to kick the props out from under the Hitler tyranny and bring about its speedy collapse. His book is entitled *The Secret Surrender* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 42s.), and it gives all the details of the Dulles-inspired Operation Sunrise which brought about the capitulation.

What is so remarkable is the exciting way in which Dulles relates these details. This is an exhaustive record of plots and counter-plots, of a secret agent's hopes and anxieties, of bitter reversals and clandestine meetings.

There is such a wealth of facts that, one feels, had the story been by any author other than Dulles he might simply have made a hash of them. One also feels that, had Mr. Dulles not been involved in the cloak-and-dagger business, he might have made quite a name for himself as a thriller writer. Another point that *The Secret Surrender* reveals is that spy-fact can often be stranger, more complicated and more exciting than spy-fiction. Readers of this particular *genre* are directed to get the Dulles book forthwith.

A surprising aspect of *The Secret Surrender* is the degree to which Dulles makes known his own feelings and thoughts about events. And this may be why his book makes such compelling reading. Dulles does not pretend to be a super-spy who is impervious to human failings. On one occasion he notes that he was put out of action by an acute and painful attack of gout, due to mental fatigue.

Like 007, Dulles also had a number, 110; and even this numerical identity once landed him in an absurd situation when he was returning to his room at the Ritz in Paris:

"I was 110, and had been 110 day in and day out for two and a half years. What the stranger asked me as we met in the shadowy corridors after midnight was, 'I beg of you, where is 110?' Since my mind was echoing the thoughts Donovan (Dulles's chief) had just left us with, the question caught me off guard. I was just about to say 'You're talking to him. I'm 110' when I suddenly woke up to the reality of the situation. He was lost in the badly lighted corridors of the hotel and was looking for his room, which happened to be 110."

☐ DEFECTIVE DETECTIVE. Those who have grown tired of the free-wheeling, wide-ranging hero of the Ian Fleming-Len

Deighton school will, without doubt, welcome the reappearance of a hero of a different sort, for so long consigned to oblivion, the private eye. He makes his return in Roderick Thorpe's new novel from America, *The Detective* (Arthur Barker, 30s.).

This figure, the laconic gumshoe, the tough loner caught up in sleazy small-time crime, was primarily the creation of those two masters of mystery fiction, Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. But, if Mr. Thorpe is trying to stake out a claim as heir to these authors' particular tradition, why has he abandoned two of its most important characteristics—brevity and force?

The most impressive feature of *The Detective* is its plot, one that the masters would certainly not have been ashamed of. Mr. Thorpe's detective, Joseph Leland, is approached by the wife of a man who has apparently committed suicide; but she claims that he was murdered. In unravelling the mysterious sequence of events leading up to the death, Leland discovers that the dead man was himself a murderer. The killing for which he was responsible was a particularly gruesome one (the squeamish are forewarned!).

The central irony of the story is that Leland had "solved" this crime in years gone by, and had built a brilliant reputation by work on it. In the light of the new evidence the detective realises that he had sent an innocent man to his death. Confronted with this situation, Leland is forced to make a moral decision which may engulf and destroy him and those who are connected with the case.

So far, so good. Having contrived a strong story line, Mr. Thorpe then proceeds to undermine it. The first flaw in *The Detective* is the flat and toneless manner in which it is related. The author almost *needs* the sensational aspects of his novel to relieve its stylistic drabness. The second major flaw is that the author cannot resist an exhaustive analysis of his characters' motives and private lives. Each detail is blown up out of all proportion to its significance to the story.

As much as any reader, I would welcome a comeback for mystery-fiction of the Chandler-Hammett brand. But I am afraid I have to report that Mr. Thorpe has not brought it off.

☐ **A QUIET TERROR.** It was with a sense of relief that I turned from Roderick Thorpe's hefty and harrowing saga to Celia Fremlin's latest thriller, *Prisoner's Base* (Gollancz, 18s.). Modest in scale, and completely without the pretensions that marred *The Detective*, this is a novel that packs a wallop that the other could not hope to equal.

The plot is slender, and it is really through her brilliantly conceived characters that the author sustains our unswerving interest in her story. Margaret, a woman in her sixties, has living in her house her daughter, Claudia, and her fifteen-year-old grand-daughter, Helen. The relations between mother and daughter are extremely strained, because of a divergence in their approach to life and its problems. The mother is a warm, down-to-earth woman who in her relations with others acts in a completely pragmatic, commonsense way; her daughter is clever and ambitious, but has rejected her mother's mental attitudes and drawn up for herself a set of principles based on modern psychoanalytic theory.

That her understanding of these theories is dubious does not seem to worry Claudia unduly. Fortunately the mother can see through her daughter's pretensions: "Yes, Claudia *wanted* her mother to play her appointed role of narrow-minded, old-fashioned bigot: thus could Claudia's own generosity and emancipation shine the brighter".

But, sadly for both, the mother cannot handle her daughter. The truth about Claudia's lofty principles is, of course, that they disguise from everyone, including herself, her own reckless enthusiasm for meddling in other people's lives. For Claudia, people are just counters in a game, to be manipulated at her pleasure, and the sicker they are, the greater the enjoyment she derives from them.

As a consequence, she invites to the house any lame duck or misfit who happens to cross her path. When *Prisoner's Base* opens, there is already one such lost soul in the house, called Mavis, whose instability Claudia is trying to surmount by means of amateur psychoanalysis. Into this already jittery household, Claudia introduces a mysterious young man, who, it is rumoured, may be a thief or a murderer. Ironically, Claudia's justification for her action is that she is trying to show the man a *normal* way of life.

The consequences lead on eventually to disaster for everyone concerned.

Right up to the end of *Prisoner's Base*, Celia Fremlin maintains the surface calm with which she began. Outright acts of violence are eschewed, and kept firmly off-stage; such things are only hinted at or mentioned as the logic of the story demands. Yet, tension and terror are running like a tingling electric wire through the core of *Prisoner's Base*.

The author's restraint gives the ghastly ending its shattering impact, and lifts this exceptional thriller into a class of its own.

☐ **FABRIC OF FEAR.** Joan Aiken is the author of a number of excellent thrillers, including *The Silence of Herondale* and *Trouble with Product X*, and her latest, *Hate Begins At Home* (Gollancz, 21s.), is her best yet. Her opening line—"Harry Lupac was waiting for the girl he was going to murder"—must surely be one of the most compelling introductions ever contrived for a thriller. And the wonder of it is that she can back it up with a tale of sustained suspense.

The story revolves around two sisters: Caroline, the younger, and Helen, the elder. By marrying Tim Conroy, Caroline has managed to escape the depressing atmosphere of her home, which is dominated by her mother, Lady Trevis; whereas Helen is still trapped there. Helen's concealed jealousy and hatred, which Miss Aiken conveys with great subtlety, is one of the main hinges upon which the plot turns.

At the beginning of *Hate Begins At Home*, Caroline has been forced to return home from the Middle East. A tragic accident, resulting in the death of her small son, has caused her a loss of memory, and left her in an unstable mental state—an easy prey for her tormentors. At the same time her bluff, sinister sister has found a lover, Henry Lupac, a famous and rather mysterious musician who has escaped from behind the Iron Curtain.

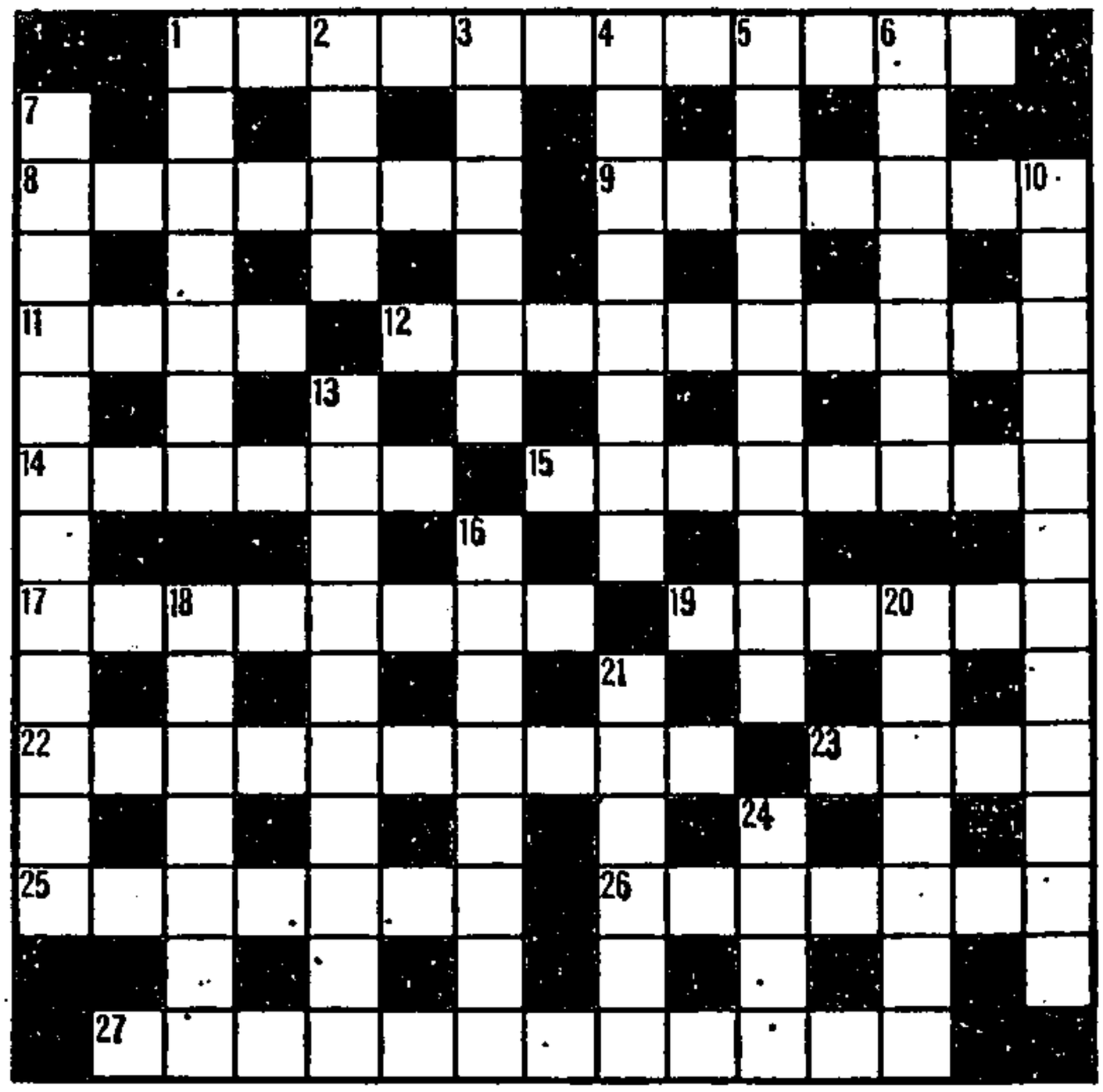
One can only admire Miss Aiken's skill at weaving these strands of her plot into a fabric of fear. But it is in the ending, with a scene of almost unbearable suspense, that she is at her most brilliant.

☐ **A SENSE OF LOSS.** In his first novel Angus Wolfe Murray takes loss as his theme, the loss of childhood innocence and the loss of loved ones. Entitled *The End of Something Nice* (Macmillan, 25s.), it concerns the break-up of an aristocratic Scottish family. As the title suggests, the tone is elegiac; and significantly the story moves from a bright summer setting of children's parties to an overcast autumnal world.

To carry such a story as this requires tremendous skill. The pitfall of sentimentality, which could lead to bathos of the worst order, is the most obvious; and I am glad to say that when Angus Wolfe Murray seems to be heading in this direction, he pulls back sharply. What saves him are his child characters, Jane and Jonathan, whose passions and anxieties he brilliantly evokes. But, unfortunately, the author does not do the same for adult emotions. He has also flawed this novel by his penchant for *recording*, rather than re-creating, dialogue; and not making clear just who is talking.

ARGOSY CROSSWORD

Solution next month



ACROSS

1 No fair-weather soldier? (5–7).

8 He exacts retribution from a craven German (7).

9 Settling the issue of French drink (7).

11 "In the spring a livelier —— changes on the burnish'd dove" (Tennyson) (4).

12 Simple pad I somehow put to the wrong use (10).

14 Stop functioning? That's what collapsible chairs should do! (4, 2).

15 French coin the Royal Navy is after for one of our rail regions (8).

17 Maid once disposed to make us laugh? (8).

19 —— for courses, racing men say (6).

22 Is an embodiment of ten cars in a tangle? (10).

23 Not a loach, but where it may be caught, perhaps (4).

25 Falls over in North America (7).

26 Brisk way of dealing with notes (7).

27 What brackets do to delay matters? (4, 6, 2).

DOWN

1 Places I represented for a particular purpose (7).

2 Wild revel in gory confusion (4).

3 Small falcon reputedly able to work wonders (6).

4 Part of the car used more in cold weather (8).

5 A job for military government? (10).

6 Upright — achieve wisdom at last? (7).

7 Contentment sought in duellist's challenge (12).

10 Those benefiting from its instruction face mounting costs! (6–6).

13 What earthquakes do in County Durham? (10).

16 Sailor after a pound in cash for a kind of pipe (8).

18 A lot of trouble for which Shakespeare was responsible! (4, 3).

20 Temporary plug? (7).

21 Keep the Territorial Army in control (6).

24 A sign of increasing significance (4).

Printed in England by HAZELL, WATSON & VINEY LTD., AYLESBURY, and published each month by FLEETWAY PUBLICATIONS LTD., FLEETWAY HOUSE, FARRINGDON STREET, LONDON, E.C.4. Subscription Rates: Inland, £2 12s. for 12 months, £1 6s. for 6 months. Overseas, £2 11s. for 12 months, £1 5s. 6d. for 6 months. Sole Agents: Australia and New Zealand, GORDON & GOTCH LTD.; South Africa, CENTRAL NEWS AGENCY LTD.; Rhodesia, Zambia and Malawi, KINGSTONS LTD. ARGOSY is sold subject to the following conditions, namely, that it shall not, without the written consent of the publishers first given, be lent, resold, or hired out, or otherwise disposed of by way of Trade, except at the full retail price as shown on the cover; and that it shall not be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise disposed of in a mutilated condition or in any unauthorised cover by way of Trade; or affixed to or as part of any publication or advertising, literary or pictorial matter whatsoever

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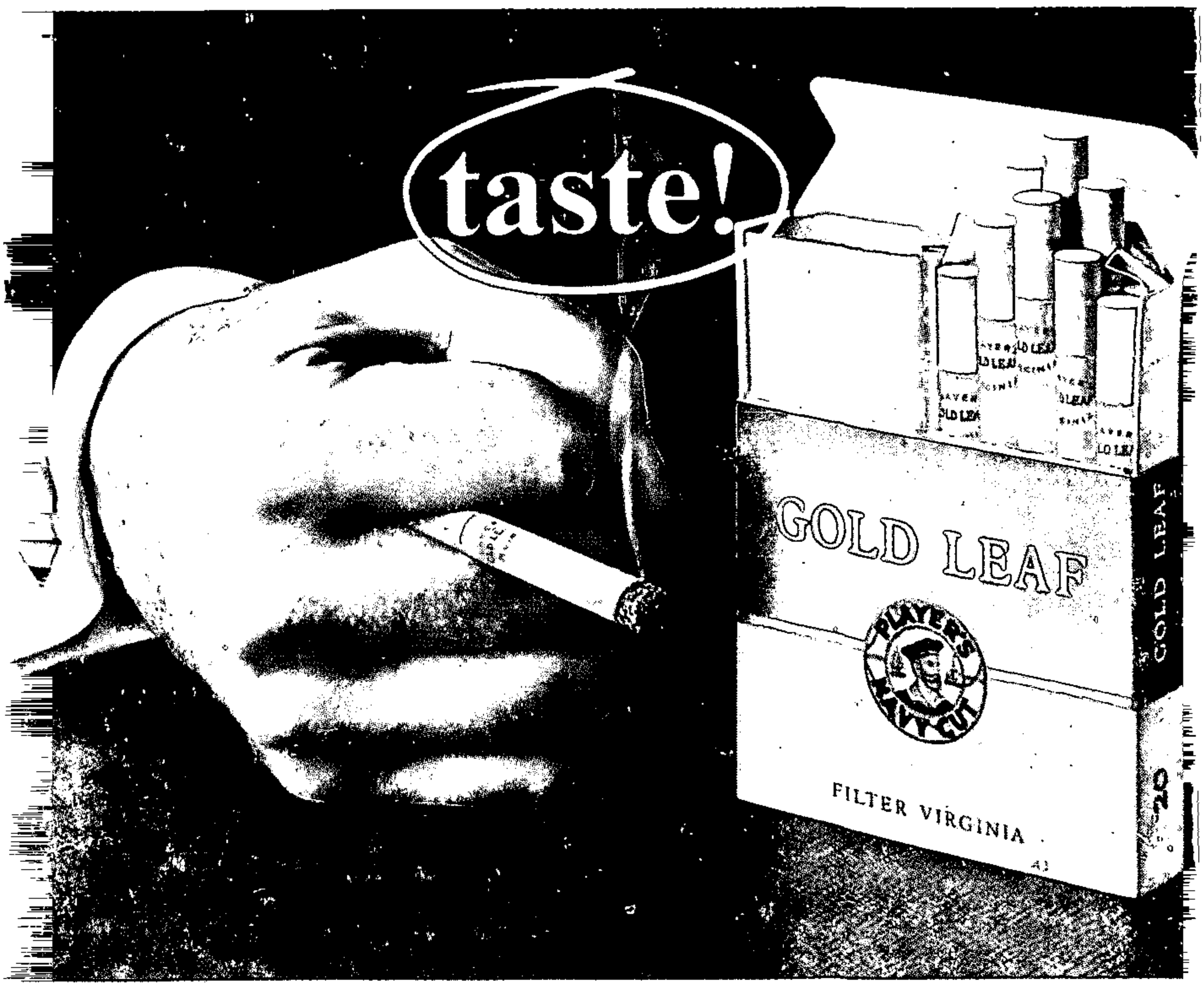

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